

**“Offensively Australian:”**

***Walkabout* and Middlebrow Writers, 1927-1969**

By

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## Abstract

This thesis undertakes a postcolonial reading of a selection of the fiction and non-fiction of Ion Idriess, Arthur Upfield, Ernestine Hill and John K. Ewers. It argues that their published and unpublished writing and correspondence contributed to a mid-twentieth-century literary discourse concerning identity, race and nation. The connection this study makes between these four middlebrow writers is their relationship with *Walkabout*, an Australian middlebrow geographic magazine. All four writers were noted contributors to the journal. In several ways their writerly endeavours—both fiction and non-fiction—paralleled *Walkabout*'s attempts to influence its readers' views concerning identity and nation, particularly in respect to rendering the lesser known and populated regions of Australia familiar to its readership. There is no shortage of studies concerning literature's engagement with the constructs of identity and nation, however, few examine the unfashionable and sometimes forgotten Australian middlebrow. This thesis argues that the mostly unsophisticated writing produced by Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers not only sought to thrill and entertain, it challenged dominant racial ideology, re-imagined settler history and embraced a modern yet distinct national identity. Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers engaged with their considerable readership in overt ways, and in hitherto unrecognised more subtle ways. Furthermore, many of their readers read across multiple genres and forms and were capable of nuanced and insightful interpretations of these works.

The body of work examined in this thesis attracts criticism for perpetuating a nostalgic national image and adopting negative racial stereotypes. Such criticism fails to identify the more subtle manner in which this writing examined

contradictions and ambiguities in mid-twentieth-century society. Idriess' writing reflected the period's acceptance of a racial hierarchy and the contested nature of Australia's cross-cultural relations, but it also supported the growing interest in Indigenous culture and unsettled dominant notions concerning race. Upfield's fiction and non-fiction undertook a similar endeavour. His examination of ambivalent relationships between black and white in pastoral Australia suggested that Aborigines should be afforded greater opportunities to participate in society. A selection of Hill and Ewers' writing recognised the role literature played in shaping a nation's culture and identity. Hill examined processes which imagined a white nation into being and shaped its identity. Ewers utilised aspects of Indigenous culture to support his representation of a distinct nation and encouraged a retreat from Empire. Both he and Upfield were outspoken advocates for the development of a broad and inclusive national literature which rejected notions of Australia's cultural inferiority. All four writers shifted many readers' gazes from urban preoccupations and encouraged them to envisage a distinct and prosperous nation which valued its unique culture above those of other Western societies.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

ANPA	Australian National Publicity Association
ANTA	Australian National Travel Association
FAWWA	Fellowship of Australian Writers—Western Australian Section

### **Terminology**

The Australian National Travel Association was renamed the Australian National Publicity Association in December 1940. The association reverted to its original name of the Australian National Travel Association in September 1954. For the sake of consistency and to avoid confusion the association will be referred to throughout this thesis as the Australian National Travel Association (ANTA).

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## Introduction

*Walkabout* was a long-running Australian geographic magazine that was launched in 1934 by the Australian National Travel Association (ANTA). Each monthly edition contained striking photography and a variety of articles concerning natural science, industrial development, local history, remote and regional communities and Indigenous culture. Although the magazine extended its coverage to the wider Pacific region it was dominated by a strong national focus. Its primary purpose was the promotion of Australian interests to local and international readers, but it also attempted to influence the domestic readers' views concerning nation and home. The magazine was largely successful in achieving these aims. David Carter claims that the publication "upgraded 'Australiana' into a serious, but still entertaining business, bringing the vast continent and its unique natural and human history ... into the possession of its mainly urban readers" ("The Mystery of the Missing Middlebrow or the C(o)urse of Good Taste" 189). A wide number of writers contributed to the magazine's endeavours.

Charles H. Holmes, the protagonist behind the magazine's publication and its editor between 1934 and 1957, described *Walkabout*'s contributors as adventurous fellow travellers and explorers of Australian frontiers ("How 'Walkabout' Began" 8). Writers were drawn from a large and varied pool of government officials, specialists, journalists, authors, academics and amateur enthusiasts. Holmes made special mention of a number of contributors including: Bill Harney, C. P. Mountford, Donald Thomson, Mary Durack, Donald Maclean, Henrietta Drake Brockman, Vance Palmer, Tarlton Rayment, Henry G. Lammond,



A. B. Haines, George Farwell, Ion Idriess, Arthur W. Upfield, Ernestine Hill and John K. Ewers (8). This thesis examines a selection of *Walkabout* articles, other non-fiction, fiction and unpublished correspondence produced by four of the aforementioned contributors: Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers.

The four writers shared *Walkabout*'s fascination with remote and regional Australia. Ewers' zeal for all that marked the nation as distinct led artist and writer Jean Lang Crowe to classify him as "offensively Australian" (56). This was a term Joseph Furphy had used to describe his own writing, however, Crowe suggests that Ewers' passion for his nation was equal to Furphy's. The term also applies to Idriess, Upfield and Hill. Their writing not only presented Australia's identity and literature as unique, it resisted a general acceptance of the nation's cultural inferiority. A shared desire to promote Australian writing, history and culture ensured the writers were ideal *Walkabout* contributors. Articles produced by Upfield and Idriess, both recognised bushmen and raconteurs, featured prominently in *Walkabout*'s inaugural issue. The focus of "Coming Down With Cattle" and "The Kimberleys" on the pastoral industry in outback Australia reflects the magazine's veneration of remote regions and communities.

The comparable visions of outback Australia contained in *Walkabout* and the writing of Upfield, Hill and Ewers was recognised in *Walkabout's Australia* (1964), Alec Bolton's anthology of *Walkabout* articles published between 1934 and 1964. He claimed that his selection was representative of the magazine's best offerings (6). The collection included nine articles published between 1935 and 1949. All were focused on non-urban Australia which implies *Walkabout*'s best articles from this period were those depicting outback communities and unique panoramas. Four of the nine selections were written by Upfield, Hill and Ewers:

Upfield's "Men Sheep and Far Horizons," Ewers' "Aboriginal Ballet" and Hill's "Crocodiles and Pink Lotus" and "Overlanders." The writers' presence in Bolton's collection suggests their work was representative of the national vision promulgated by the magazine.

Idriess was not included in Bolton's anthology but he was also a prolific author of narratives and histories that centred on central and northern Australia. The literary output of the four writers depicted a nation indelibly influenced by its settler heritage. This image was complicated by a parallel desire to influence the development of a modern and future focused sense of identity. The writers' duality of purpose reflected a measure of dissonance in the national identity; unresolved tensions weighed heavily on the nation's consciousness. As a result their engagement with the past and future provides a valuable insight into the period's literary and social history. By undertaking a postcolonial reading of a selection of their published and un-published work produced between 1927 and 1969 this thesis argues that Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers undertook a critical analysis of settler history and the constructs of identity, belonging, race and nation.

Studies concerning Australia's identity are so prevalent that Miriam Dixon identifies the topic as a national obsession (18). In a similar vein Graham Huggan suggests research concerning Australia's identity is likely to be met with a politely stifled yawn because it has become a critical commonplace (9). This is acknowledged but few of these studies have focused on writing situated outside the literary sphere. Adam Shoemaker argues that popular Australian writing published between 1929 and 1945 must be "rescued from the shadow of critical neglect which, up to now, has fallen across it" (*Black Words, White Page* 58). He claims this writing "is just as important, and deserves as much critical attention, as the

literature of the educated elite” (7). This thesis adopts an interdisciplinary approach and undertakes a close reading of fiction, non-fiction and archival material as a means of adding to the small but increasing amount of scholarship concerning a maligned section of mid-twentieth-century Australian literature.

### ***Walkabout***

*Walkabout* is the intersection point of this thesis’ examination of the writing produced by four of its contributors. A brief history of the publication and its endeavours contextualises this analysis of the writers’ shared desire to influence the national imaginary. Holmes was the motivating force behind the launch of the geographic magazine (Bolton 5). He successfully lobbied ANTA’s committee to develop a monthly journal in alignment with the association’s objectives. His vision for the proposed publication was based on the view that

Australians, or at any rate the thoughtful few, would welcome a geographical journal telling the story of the vast and comparatively little known Australia which existed beyond the cities. I suggested that I could handle the editing of such a publication for the Australian National Travel Association if it favoured the idea. (“How *Walkabout* Began” 8)

The association accepted Holmes’ proposal. The support of ANTA committee member Charles “Chas” Lloyd Jones was evident in *Walkabout*’s first issue, where he claimed that it seemed “inevitable that an organisation such as the Australian National Travel Association should produce a travel magazine” (7). The magazine’s title reflected its purpose; it referenced motion and stimulation, and encouraged readers to seek exposure to a range of experiences that might expand their understanding of nation. To this end *Walkabout* was widely distributed at a

domestic level and was made available to international readers via travel agents, shipping offices and “a host of other ‘key’ points where travel is influenced” (7).

ANTA was a private organisation formed in 1929.<sup>1</sup> It received government and private funding to promote the Australian tourism industry. In addition to this undertaking ANTA also sought to promote a greater awareness of Australia overseas, and to attract investors, investor settlers and industrialists with capital (“Australian National Publicity Association” 1). State bodies were already undertaking this work, however, some believed that a private association could “publicize Australia much better, at less cost and with a lighter, less formal and more friendly approach—and with greater expertise in the specialized technique of travel—than could a government department” (1).

ANTA’s controlling committee included representatives of railway, shipping, hotel and other interests whose businesses were associated with the tourism industry (Fetherstonhaugh 95). The organisation’s supporters believed that travel would be bolstered by a program devoted to the depiction of Australia as a distinct, attractive, easily recognisable and marketable entity (82). The method ANTA employed to achieve these goals was the publication of promotional material. A vast number of booklets, posters, handbooks, photographs, pamphlets and other material was produced. By 1950 it was estimated that seven and a half million publications had been circulated (“Australian National Publicity Association” 1). These items not only aimed to attract international travellers and encourage domestic tourism, they attempted to provide Australian residents with the knowledge they required to become national ambassadors who could readily promote their country, its people and industries.

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<sup>1</sup> ANTA was renamed the Australian National Publicity Association in December 1940. It reverted to ANTA in September 1954. This thesis will adopt ANTA for the sake of consistency.

From its inception *Walkabout* was overt in its desire to influence readers. In the first issue Jones claimed that the team behind the magazine had embarked on an educational crusade that would

enable Australians and the people of other lands to learn more of the romantic Australia that exists beyond the cities and the enchanted South Sea Islands and New Zealand. “Walkabout” will intrigue the armchair traveller; it will appeal to those with money and leisure who seek new travel fields where they may experience the thrill of the strange and the new; it will be invaluable to the educationist; and, in adult and youth alike, it will inspire an infinitely greater knowledge and appreciation of their own and neighbouring lands. (7)

*Walkabout*’s success in this endeavour was identified by Stephen Alomes, who claims that during the 1930s a widespread “awareness of the environment was heightened by adventure writers such as Ion Idriess and Frank Clune, and ... through the photographic discovery of the interior and the north in the new magazine *Walkabout*” (96).

*Walkabout*’s ability to influence the reader’s view of nation was noted by Bolton who argued that the “magazine, as much as anything else, discovered outback Australia to the popular imagination” (5). The geographic magazine did more than educate the reader concerning flora, fauna and geography, it revealed a sense of nation that placated settler anxieties concerning vast and sparsely inhabited landscapes. Mitchell Rolls’ examination of *Walkabout*’s photography suggests that the magazine made white Australians “feel more at home in the country in which they dwelt” (“Picture Imperfect” 23). *Walkabout*’s success can also be measured in a quantifiable sense.

Timothy Fetherstonhaugh's examination of *Walkabout* provides sales figures indicating the publication's success. The first print run of twenty thousand copies in 1934 sold out. By 1937 the run had increased to a monthly average of twenty-five thousand copies (67). The consistent popularity of the magazine ensured that it later claimed credit for being a positive influence on the domestic tourism industry in the 1930s: "Since *Walkabout* was launched in 1934, more and more people have decided to 'go see for themselves' (and we may—not immodestly, we believe—claim a fraction of the credit for such decisions)" (Reply to letter of R. G. De B. Griffith 40). In a similar manner ANTA drew a link between its work and a rise in temporary visitor numbers between 1931 and 1938, estimating that tourists had injected more than two million pounds into the nation's economy in 1938. ANTA also believed it had helped to attract millions of pounds worth of investment capital as it was suggested that a large proportion of the twenty thousand migrants who arrived in 1938 had been positively influenced by the organisation's publications ("Australian National Publicity Association" 1).

The fortunes of *Walkabout* took a hit at the start of the next decade, when World War II negatively impacted its circulation figures and advertising revenue. Fetherstonhaugh lists the circulation figures for 1941 and 1942 as between fifteen and seventeen thousand, while the profit margin in 1942 dropped to three hundred pounds. After this low point circulation figures and profit margins increased. In 1945 the magazine's circulation averaged over twenty-four thousand issues and the year's profit exceeded a thousand pounds. The war's end boosted this upward trend; the circulation figure for February 1946 rose to twenty-eight thousand (Fetherstonhaugh 68). These figures provided the magazine with a significant sphere of influence. *Walkabout*'s 1948 promotional article "The Australian

Geographical Society” claimed that if four people read each *Walkabout* issue, the magazine had promoted a “greater knowledge of Australia amongst a group numbering well over 100,000 persons, as 28,000 copies are printed each month” (47). By 1950 over four million copies of *Walkabout* had been sold (“Australian National Publicity Association” 1). During this decade the circulation figure increased and steadied at levels above thirty thousand copies (Fetherstonhaugh 71). Fetherstonhaugh credits much of the publication’s success to the influence of the Australian Geographic Society, formed by ANTA in 1946 (68).

Soon after the Australian Geographic Society was launched *Walkabout*’s header classified the magazine as the journal of the Australian Geographic Society. The aims of the Society were in line with that of ANTA and *Walkabout*. The first objective outlined in “The Australian Geographical Society” was to collect and disseminate geographical and other information concerning the resources, physical features, flora, fauna, industries and peoples of Australia and adjoining islands. The second was the dissemination of geographical knowledge concerning Australia and its adjoining islands, and the inculcation of the reader concerning the same. The third involved the production, sale and distribution of a range of print materials that would carry out the first two objectives. The final objective was to ensure that the society obtained the financial support it required to operate (47). *Walkabout*’s original aims of promoting Australian tourism and other interests, and increasing the public’s awareness of their nation were accentuated by its relationship with the Australian Geographic Society.

In the 1950s visible changes to *Walkabout* occurred. After Holmes’ retirement in 1957 his successor Basil Atkinson introduced colour cover pages and other modifications. The result was a period of improved circulation figures and

advertising interest (Fetherstonhaugh 72). In 1959 Holmes boasted about the magazine's success: "When I retired as managing editor two years ago, the aggregate net profit had mounted to over £60,000, and the figure has substantially increased since then" ("How 'Walkabout' Began" 8). Yet *Walkabout's* prospects were not quite as optimistic as Holmes proposed because the magazine's adoption of a cosmopolitan focus was resisted by some readers.

A letter to the *Walkabout* editor described the August 1958 cover as so artificial it "has surely broken faith with the spirit of your journals" (Griffith 40). The offending image depicted a dog sitting beside the famous sculpture of a dog on a tucker box, located at Snake Gulley near Gundagai. The reader argued that the carefully posed image did not represent *Walkabout's* view that "Australia's best offerings are off the main roads" (40). The editor's response acknowledged the magazine's past attempts to promote the nation's rich settler heritage:

Australians must get to know the whereabouts and the history of such interesting historic and cultural symbols, memorials, relics, and pieces of folk-lore ("Australiana", for want of a better word) round us. And they must see these things are preserved. For at least they will be treasured by later generations, if not by our own. (Reply to letter of R. G. DeB. Griffith 40)

The exchange indicated the extent to which outback landscapes had seeped into the national consciousness, however, the editor encouraged the reader to consider that nation's "best offerings" were also "to be found, throughout the continent—in city and country" (40). Despite the magazine's attempts to adopt a more balanced national focus and give urban locations and concerns greater coverage it could not shake its image as a champion of remote and regional Australia, nor could it fully adapt to changing social conditions. By 1974 *Walkabout* was no longer



economically viable and ceased publication (Fetherstonhaugh 75). An attempt to revive it was made in 1978 by Leisure Boating and Speedway Magazines by arrangement with ANTA but only three issues were published.

*Walkabout* spent decades projecting vibrant images of rural and remote Australia. This demonstrated the resonance of outback tropes on the urban nation's sense of place, despite suggestions of their irrelevance to modern society. The magazine defended itself against criticism that its long-held non-urban focus had misrepresented the realities faced by the majority of Australians. A 1948 article suggested that the entire nation would reap the benefits of the association's "specialized propaganda" if it attracted tourists, migrants and investors with capital ("A. N. P. A. Revives its Work" 42). This may have been true but the magazine was not simply focused on the country's prosperity, it also attempted to influence the readers' view of home, nation and identity. The failure of critics to recognise the *Walkabout* reader's capacity for varied responses and interpretations of the magazine's content has been noted by Rolls ("Picture Imperfect" 32). The nuance contained in many *Walkabout* articles was evident in two of Ewers' articles which depicted the spectacle of Western Australia's wildflower season. "The Wildflowers of Western Australia" and "Six Hundred Miles of Wildflowers" tempted readers to undertake regional tours, but they also portrayed a nation quite distinct from the British motherland.

The influence of bucolic writing on Australia's literature and its concept of nation is undeniable. Kate Darian-Smith describes outback themed literature as an important imaginative site for white Australians (109). Yet the engagement of *Walkabout* with a complex literary dialogue concerning place and identity has not been well examined. Rolls argues that "*Walkabout* enjoys the privilege of suffering

little scrutiny, a privilege shared with much Australian middlebrow cultural production” (“Reading *Walkabout* in the 1930s” 2). The vivid and sentimental writing of Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers was similarly neglected. By examining the literary output of four *Walkabout* contributors who shared the magazine’s focus on non-urban Australia and its attempt to influence the readers’ sense of place and nation, this thesis contributes to the growing body of work concerning *Walkabout* and mid-twentieth-century middlebrow writing.

### **Middlebrow writing**

The use of the term “middlebrow” requires clarification: Kate Macdonald highlights the problematic nature of the pejorative descriptor that refers to a contested cultural phenomenon (1). The label was increasingly used to describe culture and class in 1920s Britain. In the mid-twentieth-century literary sphere, middlebrow most often applied to fiction situated between the literary or highbrow writing that was placed at the pinnacle of a literary hierarchy, and the pulp or lowbrow novels that sat at the opposing position. Writing that spans across multiple genres and forms can be situated in this middle space, therefore, the term cannot be adequately described by a single definition.

In an interview with Elke D’Hoker, Nicola Humble argues that a text’s publisher, marketing campaign and sales figures influence the application of the term (261). It is true that writing lent itself to the middlebrow classification if it was produced by a prolific and well-known storyteller, was heavily marketed as entertaining or thrilling and sold in high numbers. The type of reader to whom this writing appealed also influenced the application of the term (259). If the cultural

elite dismissed a book that was embraced by general readers, the likelihood of it being deemed middlebrow increased.

Carter describes middlebrow writing as that which lay outside the preserve of specialist readers; it was easily accessible and readily available for the consumption of readers (“Modernity and the Gendering of Middlebrow Book Culture in Australia” 139). The focus of a piece of writing was another influential factor in its description; highbrow writing often focused on literary aesthetics while middlebrow writing was oriented towards the reader (Bracco 3). The difference between high and middlebrow was further complicated by the ability of writing to shift between classifications; literature once dismissed as middlebrow could be viewed as highbrow in subsequent decades (D’Hoker 260). The term’s fluidity was also influenced by discernable distinctions in mid-twentieth-century American, British and Australia middlebrow writing and institutions.

American middlebrow culture was marked by a desire for self-education. Joan Shelley Rubin claims that the period saw an unprecedented range of activities that attempted to commodify forms of highbrow culture and make it available to those situated outside the cultural elite (i). This endeavour was based on the premise that “culture could be dissociated from wealth; that it could be acquired” (1). Those advocating this view suggested that a person could become more cultured if they educated themselves concerning elitist cultural expressions. Literature played an integral role in this process. A plethora of literary activities undertaken by American libraries, broadcasters, book clubs and other institutions serviced a growing market formed by readers seeking a cultural education (xii).

Large numbers of mid-twentieth-century American readers with leisure time and disposable income created a growing market for entertaining and “good”

quality fiction. Much of this writing was situated between literary writing and pulp fiction, and was described as middlebrow. The authors of these novels were more often accomplished storytellers rather than highly skilled writers. Janice Radway describes the middlebrow writing which dominated the period as “fast paced, easy to read, driven by good plotting, and peopled by engaging characters” (102). She identifies a demand for immersive reading material rather than simplistic thrillers, stating that “good reading, as they described it, produced an awareness of the self expanded, a sense that the self was absorbed into something larger, not dissolved exactly, but quivering in solution, both other and not” (117). Middlebrow writing was frequently intellectually stimulating rather than a primary source of mindless entertainment. In support of this argument Radway claims that a range of middlebrow novels encouraged female readers to reflect on their lives and the general place of women in society. The view that middlebrow writing could facilitate critical thought (103) was rejected by exponents of literary or highbrow writing.

The hostility of the American academy, literary authors, reviewers and critics towards middlebrow writing ensured that very few critical examinations of this writing were undertaken in the mid-twentieth century. Some writers, including Upfield who was very successful in the American crime market, claimed the self-serving interests of these influential groups led to attempts to limit the credibility of, and interest in, commercially successful writing (see Chapter One’s examination of Upfield’s 1948 novel *An Author Bites the Dust*). Rubin identifies Dwight Macdonald as the most vocal American critic of the middlebrow as his “Masscult and Midcult” (1962) was so dismissive of middlebrow literature that it effectively licensed its scholarly neglect (xv). Tom Perrin also depicts Dwight Macdonald as a

particularly harsh critic of middlebrow writing, recounting the literary sensation caused when Macdonald accused T. S. Eliot and Ernest Hemingway of publishing middlebrow writing. Macdonald disparaged the two writers for failing to uphold the doctrine of literary fiction and defiling themselves within the “dead sea of masscult” (151). Perrin claims that Macdonald’s criticism was less an attack on middlebrow writing than it was a denunciation of what he perceived as Eliot and Hemingway’s rejection of a modernist aesthetic (152), but what this incident does reveal is the tension, and quite frequently the vitriol, that separated high and middlebrow literature.

British literary critics were as unequivocal in their defence of the elitist literary sphere as their American counterparts. The most infamous attack on the middlebrow was undertaken by Virginia Woolf in “Death of the Moth and Other Essays” (1947). Woolf’s claim that this inferior body of work was an affront to literature was exaggerated (113), but her view was supported by other literary figures. Rosa Maria Bracco claims that a range of influential British critics, including Q. D. Leavis and F. R. Leavis, were so dramatic in their condemnation of non-literary writing that they “equated the deterioration of literary standards with the poor state of contemporary civilization” (7). The strong opposition of the British literary elite to the rise of middlebrow writing illustrates Kate Macdonald’s suggestion that this body of work was a victim of “a critical hegemony that applied canonical value judgements to all that was printed or broadcast” (11).

Bracco challenges the view that writing situated between the British high and lowbrow in the 1920s and 30s was inherently mediocre by identifying its ability to stimulate critical thought. She claims that middlebrow novels were produced by “skilled storytellers to whom the unfolding of a sentimental plot with

a moral or social message was more important than an artistic rendering of beauty or refinement of style” (3). The ability to engage with nuanced themes sets this writing apart from lowbrow novels. Bracco identifies the ability of middlebrow literature to play “an important part in spreading and perpetuating the values that were the foundation of English society and politics, and represented a means of legitimating the status quo” (5). Her analysis concludes that British middlebrow writing placed a focus on traditional frames of reference, and provided readers with reassurance during tumultuous times by counteracting the “disturbing developments of the modern world by re-asserting well-established values and attitudes” (6). It engaged readers who were unsettled by modernism and presented conservative ideologies as stable and foundational elements of society. This trend contrasts with the tendency of the middlebrow writing produced by Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers to encourage readers to challenge and re-imagine accepted notions and ideologies.

Carter’s examination of the Australian publishing industry claims that a cultural space opened between the high and lowbrow during the 1930s (“Mystery” 184). The literature that emanated from this space was diverse in form, style and disposition. Despite this, he argues that much of this literature was “less about educating oneself than modernizing oneself” (“Modernity” 138). It was not dominated by a preoccupation with elite culture. Instead, its cultural aspirations were often focused on national constructs, therefore, Carter suggests Australian middlebrow writing published in 1930s and 40s frequently examined virtuous citizenship and a nationed modernity (“Mystery” 184). Best-selling examples often included travel or descriptive writing that focused on remote Australia and engaged in what he describes as a “journalistic form of national validation” (“Modernity”

140). Some reviewers suggested this writing placed a simplistic and nostalgic focus on traditional forms of bush nationalism (Baker, “City Themes Being Ignored” 82), but Carter identifies a shift towards a cosmopolitan focus and an attempt to boost Australia’s development potential. The literary interplay between the past and the future suggested that “a modern national culture offered to reunite individuality, class aspiration, and democratic community; and to mediate between modernity, populism, and tradition” (“Mystery” 193). This thesis builds on Carter’s claim that middlebrow writing contributed to a broad, ambiguous and complex literary dialogue concerning nation (“Modernity” 138). It reveals that a section of Australian middlebrow writing not only entertained, it encouraged readers to re-examine settler history and envisage a prosperous and modern future.

Middlebrow is a term most often applied to fiction, however, this thesis extends the classification to non-fiction. A number of scholars have already made this connection. Kate Macdonald claims that during the mid-twentieth century the middlebrow classification was “not confined to fiction as is the common perception today” (7). Carter also applies the term to a range of literary forms. He describes a number of commercial magazines from the 1930s and 40s as middlebrow because they exhibited “a serious interest in books, culture, taste and entertainment” (“Mystery” 186). *Walkabout* is included in this group (189). It shared a common endeavour with other middlebrow institutions that were committed to expanding the circulation of culture and education (177). These cultural aspirations distinguished the closely related and often indistinguishable categories of middlebrow and popular (184).

Popular history and science writing were the most prevalent forms of non-fiction that were marketed to the mid-twentieth-century readers located between

idle consumers and recognised specialists. Radway's examination of the American Book-of-the-Month Club claims that Larry Shapiro, the editor of the popular history category, described this writing as containing "the weight and power to make you see things from a historian's perspective" (106). It was also dominated by a strong narrative thread that aimed to sustain the interest of non-specialist readers (105). It was situated between academic writing and superficial survey or simple journalism and attempted to entertain while imparting knowledge and critically engaging readers. During a period in which Australian writing struggled to compete with the dominance of British and American writing (Carter, "Modernity" 136), *Walkabout's* domestic focus encouraged non-fiction readers to frame a distinct sense of nation that embraced its unique culture.

*Walkabout's* nationalist endeavour was shared by the non-fiction and fiction published by Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers which variously attempted to construct the image of a modern nation that recognised its settler heritage, or "the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2). The four writers frequently undertook critical examinations of what many believed to be indissoluble truths. The focus that their writing placed on the notions of White Australia, a racial hierarchy and British cultural supremacy highlighted the multiple layers of ambiguity and contradiction that underpinned Australia's sense of nation. Much of their literary output demonstrated an awareness that they moved through what Helen Gilbert and Anna Johnston termed as "culturally conceived space" (5), that had been wrested from the control of the Indigenous population and re-imagined as a "new" and white nation. The willingness of Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers to challenge and at times reject foundational concepts of nation which others accepted, supports Bill Ashcroft's



view that “resistance has always dwelt at the heart of the struggle between imperial power and post-colonial identity” (*Post-Colonial Transformation* 13). The nuance contained in the literature produced by Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers contributed to a multifaceted dialogue that examined what it meant to be Australian.

### **A postcolonial reading**

Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers enjoyed a level of renown as prolific and proficient storytellers. They contributed more than just a plethora of vivid tales concerning outback landscapes, lifestyles and communities; they encouraged readers to renegotiate their views concerning nation and home. Robert Dixon argues that fiction best described as “ripping yarns” was capable of providing critical readers with the opportunity to read against accepted constructs (*Writing the Colonial Adventure* 200). Lisa Slater’s study of postcolonial literature also classifies writing that contains a strong narrative focus as an influential medium. She claims that storytelling invites participation and dialogue, and can generate a sense of belonging by transforming space into place (354). The preoccupation of Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers with central and northern Australia influenced their readers’ sense of nation and place as they enabled the formation a connection to regions many had not visited. This engagement ensures that their writing provides a focal point for examinations concerning nation and place.

In the following chapters it will be argued that Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers sought to challenge and shape their readers’ views concerning home. Their writing rejected notions that Australians should continue to accept the idea that their nation was primarily a subordinate member of the British Commonwealth. All four writers examined and resisted Australia’s marginalised position in the

international sphere by adopting outback Australia as the focal point of their world view and ignoring international literary influences. The four writers questioned the notion that Australia was comprised of a transplanted British population by consistently presenting the image of a people who were “at home” rather than yearning for their motherland. Their consistent and strong domestic focus presented the image of a nation that had become quite distinct from its British roots. These writers were not alone in this endeavour; others including Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin have identified this trend within contemporary postcolonial literature (135).

The fiction and non-fiction produced by Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers was embraced by many readers between 1930-60. Their large sphere of influence was accentuated by their high public profile and journalistic work which provided them with the opportunity to promote their like-minded views concerning literature and society. The engagement of their varied forms of writing with postcolonial tensions concerning identity and race contributed to a complex intertextual dialogue. Bob Hodge examined the relationship between writer, text and reader and argues that the formation of meaning is complex and inter-textual because many readers range across a diverse array of writing (48). Ashcroft makes a similar observation, suggesting that the text is “something more than the marks on the page, for it exists in the participation of social beings whom we call writers and readers, and who constitute the writing as communication of a particular kind” (*Post-Colonial Transformation* 59). According to the views of Hodge and Ashcroft it can be assumed that writing—whether it is literary or middlebrow—does more than reflect culture and society, it influences and shapes its development.

Catriona Elder highlights the active nature of writing in her claim that it does cultural work (*Dreams and Nightmares* 234). The writing produced by Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers attempted to engage readers who sought a literary respite from troubled times. In overt and subtle ways they encouraged readers to renegotiate a sense of place and nation that was based on British ideals. They critiqued social and cultural norms, and identified areas they would like to see further developed or transformed. This facet of their writing supports the suggestion of Carter and Kay Ferres that 1930s literature “became a way of thinking politically, especially for opening up a space for talk about the national culture opposed to official patriotic rhetoric” (146). Alomes similarly describes Australia as a nation in transition in the interwar period (73). Many advocated the continued imitation of British cultural institutions (Alomes 73; Grant 9), but as time passed and another global conflict drew to a close many artists and intellectuals expressed a sense of disenchantment with Western civilisation (McGregor 20). Some questioned whether the accepted racial hierarchy that placed the West well above primitive or tribal societies was a foundational truth or an illusion. While some were increasingly interested in Aboriginal culture and searched for “alternatives to the materialism, alienation and anomie of the West” (20), the authority of the white majority was never seriously threatened. Aborigines remained controlled and contained on the margins of Australian society. The prevalence of racial and social ambiguities in the period highlights that “Australia’s engagement with modernity has always been ambivalent” (White and Russell ix).

A cursory reading of the literature produced by Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers reveals their ready adoption of racist and ambiguous language and stereotypes, however, a nuanced reading of their work reveals a complex

engagement with race. It is undeniable that much of their writing is paternalistic and supremacist but it also frequently encouraged the reader to examine racist ideology, to consider the lived reality of Aborigines and to afford Indigenous history and culture a place in the national story. Ambivalence and complexity are typical components of postcolonial writing. Ashcroft argues that colonised societies are not coherent or predictable states of being (*On Post-Colonial Futures* 128). The level of inconsistency in the writing of Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers highlights Huggan's claim that "race and racism are semantically slippery and historically shifting ... both are ideological constructs whose meanings are continually contested, and whose social function and effect may vary considerably across time and space" (14). As a consequence it is not necessary for this thesis to attempt to rehabilitate the writing of Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers.

Is it probable that those reading for pleasure would be influenced by fiction and non-fiction that was racially ambiguous and encouraged a retreat from Empire? Margriet Bonnín's study of mid-twentieth-century Australian descriptive and travel writing suggests that it could facilitate critical enquiry. She claims that travel and descriptive writing could encourage the reader "to think for themselves in their assessments of the country, and to see clearly the realities of the present and the real probabilities of the future" (390). Her view is supported by Meaghan Morris who suggests that this type of writing could not only reinterpret the past and present in constructivist fictions of the future, it could also transform these fictions into reality (171). This frequently thrilling and vivid literature did not simply reflect the past and present; it exerted some influence on some readers' view of nation. Stephen Greenblatt's examination of *National Geographic* supports this view. He asserts the American geographic magazine's readers were encouraged to

“push beyond” accepted racial beliefs, and utilise the magazine in their development of an identity that was not based on homogenous or dominant ideologies (120).

Maureen Fuary’s examination of Idriess’ novel *Drums of Mer* (1933) demonstrates the influence a book can exert on readers’ conceptions of culture and history. Yam Island people invested the novel with cultural influence because they used the book as a means to “know themselves, white others, and their past” (247). A single piece of writing or a body of work could inspire negligible, subtle or dramatic responses in a variety of readers. It is erroneous to suggest that the ability to influence or inspire was restricted to literary or highbrow writing. Carter confirms that readers of non-literary writing were capable of applying generalised critical thought (“Mystery” 179). This thesis is based on the view that middlebrow writing could create a space for readers to carefully examine complex constructs such as nation and race.

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Literary and cultural elitism were powerful social forces in the mid-twentieth century. Hodge states that the constructed division between literary forms, genres, writers and readers is an act of classification that “is always a strategy of control. What is classified and controlled is not just texts. The classifications of texts are also classifications of people—readers and writers—and of what they write or read about and what they should think and mean” (21). The suggestion that those who enjoyed non-elite forms of literature were passive or unthinking reader is described by Ken Gelder as an elitist view (36). Ewers and Upfield reacted strongly against expressions of literary elitism. Chapter One—“‘Claquers’ and Storytellers: Tensions Between the Brows” examines their published and unpublished writing

which directly addressed the issue. The two *Walkabout* contributors formed a friendship in 1930 after Ewers wrote a favourable review of Upfield's novel *The Beach of Atonement* (1930) for *The West Australian* (Ewers, *Long Enough For a Joke* 133). Both writers emphatically refused to accept the edicts of the literary elite.

A major point of difference between Ewers and Upfield was their willingness to join and support literary groups. Ewers held a respected position in Western Australia's literary scene, however, he clashed with members of the academy due to their unwillingness to value Australian writing higher than that produced by other nations. Ewers' roles as author, journalist and literary critic provided him with a public profile and a forum he could use to support the development of a broad national literature. His emphatic support for the development of a distinct and inclusive national literature was most evident in his literary survey *Creative Writing in Australia* (1945). In contrast to Ewers, Upfield made little attempt to engage with the literary sphere. His reaction to the consistent criticism his crime writing received was aggressive; his novel *An Author Bites the Dust* (1948) was a thinly veiled attack on Melbourne's literary societies and a treatise that supported middlebrow writing. Chapter One reveals the depth of Ewers and Upfield's commitment to the promotion of a national literature that valued the contribution of a wide range of writers and was not controlled by the literary elite.

Idriess' writing was also influenced by a fervent sense of nationalism. Extensive outback travels instilled a love of country and brought the writer into contact with a wide range of people and races. Chapter Two—"Ion Idriess: Pride and Paradox" examines the ambivalent representations of race that dominated his writing. Shoemaker is highly critical of Idriess' adoption of racial stereotypes in

*Outlaws of the Leopolds* (1952), a fictional account of an infamous episode of frontier conflict (139). Idriess' depictions of Aborigines in the novel are frequently insensitive but this did not mean that he was incapable of subtlety. The novel's presentation of a white and black point of view contrasted the motivations and actions of Aboriginal resistance fighters with the mounted police, and unsettled the dominance of a white point of view. This nuance is evident in a range of Idriess' writing, including his *Walkabout* articles, so too are his direct appeals to readers to seek a greater understanding of Aboriginal people and culture.

The suggestion that Australian society and historiography should afford Indigenous society and culture a greater level of recognition is repeated throughout Idriess' writing. His attempts to engage the reader in a critical examination of race supports the claim of Hodge and Vijay Mishra that "the dominant society will remain incomprehensible to itself as long as it ignores or disregards Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal perspectives and Aboriginal understandings of Australian society" (71). The depth of Idriess' interest in Aboriginal culture and his interest in black and white relations have not been recognised by those who fail to see beyond his distinct writing style and ambiguous depictions of race. J. J. Healy's *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia* (1978) and Terry Goldie's *Fear and Temptation* (1989) are acclaimed studies concerning the representations of race in Australian literature, yet both exclude the contributions of middlebrow writers. Shoemaker claims that Healy's omission is significant as non-literary or popular writers were often more widely read than their literary counterparts (54). Chapter Two seeks to address this omission by examining the didactic thread running throughout Idriess' outback narratives and revealing the insight they provide into ambivalent mid-twentieth-century race relations.

Upfield shared Idriess' passion for remote Australia and his interest in the complexities that dominated Australia's race relations. A wide selection of Upfield's writing focused on tensions surrounding issues of land-ownership and miscegenation. Chapter Three—"Arthur W. Upfield: Crime and Justice in Pastoral Australia" examines his *Walkabout* articles and crime novels that depict a shifting and uncomfortable distance separating owners of large pastoral enterprises and their Aboriginal workforce. His writing posed but left unanswered the question: who has greatest right to belong in pastoral Australia? Contradiction and ambiguity dominated his examinations of belonging and race. Indigenous characters simultaneously adhered to and challenged social and racial norms. This fluidity unsettled dominant racial ideology and encouraged readers to imagine a society that afforded Aborigines increased educational and vocational opportunities, and allowed them to contribute to the national story.

Chapter Four—"Ernestine Hill: 'The Ghost of the Old, the Chaos of the New'" undertakes an analysis of Hill's fiction and non-fiction that venerated the colonial past while also envisaging a prosperous future for a modern nation. Her *Walkabout* articles waxed lyrical about the tourism and other development potential of a vast and varied continent. An unerring belief that Australia could successfully overcome two world wars and an economic depression was evident in her fictional biography *My Love Must Wait* (1941). The main protagonist, the famed coastal surveyor Matthew Flinders, not only envisaged a prosperous future for the infant colony; his involvement in the documentation of the nation's shape and form contributed to processes that imagined a new nation into being. Cartography was presented as a powerful tool of control and conquest which supports Ashcroft's claim that apart



from the invention of History, there has been no more profound effect on people's understanding of the nature of the world than in its representation in maps. Geography, maps and mapping have arguably had a greater effect on our ways of imagining the world than any other discourse. (*Post-Colonial Transformation* 128)

Map making was a means of re-textualizing the southern continent's identity and enforcing a Eurocentric spatiality (133). Maps played an integral role in the dispossession of Aborigines in *My Love Must Wait*. They created a white narrative of nationhood that supplanted an ancient and oral society that "possessed a set of qualities that have been disvalued in the post-Gutenberg regime of literary discourse" (Hodge and Mishra 75). The novel not only revealed the manner in which cartography expunged the Indigenous presence from white historiography, it examined the origins of tensions generated by Australia's depiction as both a new and an ancient land. This dichotomy is further examined in Chapter Five.

Australia's identity as a new nation was tied to its conception as a British colony. In contrast representations of the country as an ancient land typically focused on the nation's rich Indigenous heritage. Chapter Five—"John K. Ewers: Home, Place and Belonging" examines the writer's support for a national identity that placed greater emphasis on Indigenous culture, and encouraged a reduction in the strength of the ties that bound Australian cultural expressions and concepts of home to British versions. His writing embedded white characters in the Australian landscape via an Indigenous-styled connection to country. By focusing on distinctly Australian landscapes and cultural expressions the reader was encouraged to consider themselves to be "at home," rather than yearn for a motherland many would never visit.

Ewers' attempts to re-imagine the notions of nation and home illustrated Jane Carruthers' claim that "while different groups look at, inhabit and enjoy the same earth, everyone sees it through culturally constructed lenses" (251). The lens that coloured all forms of Ewers' writing was the refusal to countenance the acceptance of the superiority of British cultural expressions. He depicted an incongruence in continued attempts to emulate British ideals and cultural institutions and encouraged readers to explore alternate points of view. His writing highlighted John Carroll's view that "different groups in the population see different things and take different things as important; moreover, there are many different things to see" (210). Ewers did not consider Australia to be a pseudo-British nation; he portrayed a distinct nation that valued its black and white heritage and unique characteristics.

Carter states that the literature which emerged from mid-twentieth-century middlebrow culture "has largely slipped by the attention of literary history" ("Mystery" 174). By undertaking a close reading of the writing produced by four *Walkabout* contributors, which has long considered unfashionable, this thesis makes a contribution to the rectification of this oversight. The conclusion argues that despite the many flaws and imperfections in the writing of Idriess, Hill, Upfield and Ewers, this body of work contributed something of value to an intriguing period of Australian literary history, and provides a fresh insight into mid-twentieth-century Australian society and culture. It is acknowledged that there is much to be critical of in their writing, namely their many racist and insensitive portrayals of Aboriginal people. This aspect of their work should not be downplayed but neither should it dominate the criticism surrounding their literary output.

## Chapter One

### “Claquers” and Storytellers: Tensions Between the Brows.

Middlebrow writing was frequently subject to scornful and dismissive criticism from the elitist end of the literary spectrum. Vance and Nettie Palmer were two influential figures who denigrated this writing as “slapdash” (Nile, “Literary Democracy and the Politics of Reputation” 140). A range of book reviewers were similarly critical. Arthur W. Upfield’s status as an early contributor of *Walkabout* did not protect him from ambivalent assessments of his crime novels. A 1957 *Walkabout* review of *The Battling Prophet* (1956) provides a typical example; the novel is dismissed as “a good yarn, entertaining, incredible ... a bedtime story that keeps the light burning late” (“Napoleon Again” 48). This chapter examines Upfield’s reaction to what he viewed as unfair criticism of his prolific fiction and non-fiction, and reveals a discernable level of rivalry and antagonism between Australian middlebrow writers and supporters of literary writing. Richard Nile claims that a significant amount of envy was exhibited by those who spent a great deal of time planning, styling and re-drafting novels that often sold in far fewer numbers than the highly saleable commodities produced by commercially successful authors (“Literary Democracy” 141). When praise was afforded to Upfield’s writing it usually referred to his ability to present resonant images of outback landscapes.

John K. Ewers was a friend of Upfield for a number of years. His sympathetic review (using the pseudonym “Telamon”) of Upfield’s novel *The Sands of Windee* (1931) noted that the writer’s greatest strength was the ability to provide vivid insights “into the conditions of life in the Australian outback which

intimate contact has given him” (“Australiana: The Sands of Windee” 5). A *Sunday Times* review of the same novel shared Ewers’ view. It suggested Upfield’s narratives

revealed an intimate and sympathetic knowledge of Australian life and conditions, particularly in the outback, and the author’s splendid ability as a storyteller. In truth, some of his pen pictures of Australian scenery and atmosphere are as good as anything yet done. (“Gripped by Drought”)

The recognition of an intensity in Upfield’s writing countered suggestions that middlebrow writing was inherently inferior, superficial and of questionable quality (Casey 25). A number of reviews recognised, sometimes grudgingly, Upfield’s skill in portraying outback scenes.

A *Sunday Times* critique of *Bushranger of the Skies* (1940) observed that Upfield’s writing demonstrated an extensive knowledge of the region in which the novel was set (“White Gum” 8). Pat Wallace’s review of Upfield’s *Bony and the Kelly Gang* (1960) drew a similar conclusion by praising the crime writer’s vivid depictions of the outback’s “harshness and its beauties, its dangers and its unexpected welcomes” (324). Upfield’s literary strength was also evident to an anonymous reviewer of *The Will of the Tribe* (1962) who admitted that while Upfield’s writing was clumsy and rough, the novel’s power resided “less in the story than in the vivid, deeply felt evocation of the face of Australia” (“Arthur Upfield Writes His Thirty-first Outback Novel” 19). Upfield’s writing exuded his admiration for outback landscapes and communities in a similar manner to the bush writing of the 1890s.

The bucolic writing of Upfield and Henry Lawson was subject to a similar level of ambivalent criticism. Vance Palmer devoted a chapter of *National*

*Portraits* (1940) to Lawson as he was interested in writing that portrayed a distinctly Australian identity and sentiment (see also *The Legend of the Nineties* [1954]), but it is not surprising that the praise afforded to Lawson by a strong supporter of literary writing was qualified. Palmer claimed there had

always been something a little furtive and shamefaced about our appreciation of Lawson. We have been inclined to regard him as the fool of the family; the inspired fool, perhaps, human and even lovable in the home, but not quite fit to meet the critical eyes of the outside world. (*National Portraits* 159)

The notion that Australian literature was inferior was repeated in Palmer's suggestion that Lawson's work would make a poor showing "in the company of writers overseas, those successful writers of the day who know so instinctively what good form is, in life and literature" (159). Palmer's adherence to an exclusionary literary hierarchy (Serle n.pag.) reveals the tendency for proponents of highbrow writing to read a text against predefined expectations and classifications (Dale 3).

Palmer argued that Lawson's writing could not be placed alongside acclaimed writing from other national literatures, however he did acknowledge Lawson's unrivalled ability to depict non-urban landscapes and communities in a manner that engendered a strong sense of place. Palmer commended Lawson for being a writer who

gave eyes to people who otherwise could never have looked at the life around them with penetration and understanding. In his brief, unemphatic sketches he made Australians, for the first time, aware of themselves. (*National Portraits* 166)

Lawson's contribution to a nationalist literary discourse was achieved, according to Palmer, by a subtle and humorous portrayal of "the world he had been familiar with in boyhood" (163). Upfield shared Lawson's aptitude for depicting resonant images of non-urban Australia so it is not surprising that he was an admirer of Lawson's writing.

Upfield outlined his respect for the outback and Lawson in "Beyond the Mirage," where he claimed that his passion for the Australian bush would "burn until the end ... cities bore me. Farming country leaves me cold. Neither cities nor the farming country is Australia, the real Australia adequately described by the immortal Lawson" (34). His ardour was matched by other writers including Ewers, Ion Idriess and Ernestine Hill who all privileged "the bush as Australia's definitive reality" (Strauss 119). Writers who ascribed value to outback tropes were subject to the disdain of those who placed more worth on British and American literary traditions. In 1931 Arthur Wilberforce Jose, an English historian who had lived in Australia for an extended period, reflected on the propensity of Australians to accept their nation's literary inferiority. He argued this tendency was manifested in a self-conscious and quavering note that pervaded the output of the nation's writers, but with time he expected Australian literature would evolve and eventually "challenge by various devices the opinion of its elders and its kin on this side of the oceans" (737). The fiction, non-fiction and correspondence of Upfield and Ewers presented their readers with such a challenge. Gordon Hutner's examination of reader-focused mid-twentieth-century American middlebrow writing argues its readers sought a literary engagement that would be both entertaining and instructive (1). Australian middlebrow writing exhibited the same ability because not all readers passively consumed literary commodities (Carter, *Always Almost*

*Modern* xii). Ewers and Upfield's attempt to engage active readers in critical a examination of nationhood and its literary representation.

Ewers challenged readers to construct a distinct sense of nation that valued its cultural expressions in *The Great Australian Paradox* (1939), his presidential address to the first annual dinner of the Fellowship of Australian Writers—Western Australian Section (FAWWA); *Tell the People* (1943), a treatise on the work of Joseph Furphy; and *Creative Writing in Australia* (1945), a literary survey of Australian writing. Upfield's polemical novel *An Author Bites the Dust* (1948) presented a response to the views of the literary sphere which he believed were biased and discriminatory. Ewers and Upfield vigorously defended nationalist writing that focused on non-urban scenes and repudiated an unquestioned acceptance of the dictates of supporters of literary writing. The following close reading reveals Ewers and Upfield were pugnacious in their insistence that middlebrow writing should be afforded a place in Australia's national literature.

### ***An Author Bites the Dust***

The views of many readers continue to be influenced by the opinions of writers, critics and the academy. This ensures that critical judgements, that are often unexamined, continue to filter down to those who pursue an interest in literary writing (Casey 25). In the mid-twentieth century a distinct level of antagonism between advocates of highbrow and middlebrow writing is evident (Carter, *Always Almost Modern* xiii). American academic William Pannacker admits he was influenced by these tensions in his youth, when a sense of cultural inferiority propelled him to read and collect literature that might impress others and relieve his "middlebrow-status anxiety" (3). Janet Galligani Casey notes that negative

connotations that have long surrounded middlebrow writing continue to be maintained by the academy (25). Upfield's writing reveals he was acutely aware of this literary divide.

Upfield was happy to acknowledge that his writing was frequently subject to negative criticism ("Beyond the Mirage" 1) but he claimed that "I have never permitted myself to be hurt by being ignored by the literary giants in this country. I went my own lonely road and kept forging ahead" (Letter to Miles Franklin). This stoic declaration belied his frequent expressions of annoyance at social and literary elitism and snobbery. While living in England in the post-World War I period he and his wife were irritated by the many "snubs we received from people who thought we did not keep strictly to our place in the scheme of life" ("Beyond the Mirage" 135). The pressure to conform to social expectations rarely influenced Upfield's behaviour. He immigrated to Australia at a young age rather than comply with familial expectations (Rolfe 16), and his wife's refusal to grant him a divorce did not deter him from re-establishing his life with another woman and her child (Lindsey 170). The strong-willed writer generally had little time for social niceties, therefore, he repeatedly argued his point of view concerning literary elitism.

Upfield's hostility towards literary writers, critics, associations and societies was unequivocal and well-known. Writer and journalist Pamela Ruskin reported that Upfield believed a number of "literary snobs" had a strangling effect on Australian literature ("Arthur Upfield Makes Crime Pay" 44). Upfield believed that variety was an essential component of a thriving national literature: "I want to see a free growth of literature in Australia, not a thing forced along a road as directed. As you know literature is a flower composed of countless elemental influences" (Letter to Miles Franklin). The image of an elite group that belittled the



work of commercially successful writers while attempting to influence the terms of good taste and promoting literary writing, was evident in a 1930 letter to farming friend E. Verco Whyte:

The whole problem boiled down is this. Write trash which will please the “literary blokes” and you will get publicity; write good clean adventure and mystery yarns which will satisfy ordinary clean minded people and your way will be long and lonely. (Letter to E. Verco Whyte August 1930)

Upfield discounted the views of critics by suggesting that the only opinions he countenanced were those of his readers. This reference supports David Carter’s suggestion that middlebrow writing was reader focused ( “*All About Books and the Modern Reader*” 333).

Upfield’s awareness of his readership and his dislike for influential literary figures was evident throughout his writing and correspondence. His letter to Philip Whelan, a well-known Australian book collector, boasted that his novels attracted those “who read for entertainment and not to be impressed by the author’s superiority” (Letter to Philip Whelan). Decades later Upfield maintained a sense of pride in his continued ability to attract a wide readership. In a 1963 interview for *Readers’ Review* he made the unequivocal claim that

I’m not literary—and don’t want to be. I’d rather have people read my books, understand them, enjoy them. I don’t want to be consigned to the oblivion reserved for our great literary figures. I’m a story teller, not a blanky amateur writing high-falutin’ rubbish. (“He Won’t be a Literary Man” 1)

Upfield depicted himself as a popular storyteller who was unfairly maligned by other members of the literary sphere. The disdain that critics reserved for popular

and middlebrow writing was apparent to Ewers who claimed that the critics' "delicate nostrils are affected by anything that savors of popular appeal" ("The Australian Bookman: Literary Criticism in Australia" 23). Tensions between middlebrow and literary writers often centred on the commercial aspect of writing.

Upfield claimed that the criticism levelled at his crime writing was often driven by those who were envious of his financial success.

In no other profession is jealousy so fierce as it is in the profession of letters.

The Green Eyed God dwells in the soul of every author, while literary history has proved that the author-critic is a sycophant; for when the public discover a book it likes despite his sneers and the hostility of publishers and booksellers, writers by and large rush in with their absurd, "I told you so."

("Literary Illusions" 10)

Nile notes a level of jealousy or "sour grapes" exhibited by writers who could not achieve the sales of successful middlebrow writers ("Literary Democracy" 140).

Upfield was buoyed by the popularity of his crime series in Australia, America and beyond, which ensured that he would not be convinced that his literary output was inherently inferior to other forms of writing. Ruskin shared his view as she lamented that Upfield's achievements in crime writing were not well recognised in Australia. She argued that he was

not nearly as well known to Australian readers as he should be. In America he rates among the best 10 mystery writers, with sales well over the 400,000 mark. He says with a somewhat bitter smile: "To do any good in Australia—you have to go away first!" ("Author For Your Bookshelf" 32)

This is a reference to the praise afforded to a number of acclaimed expatriate writers, while Upfield's international renown as a crime writer was dismissed as a lesser achievement.

The annoyance Upfield felt towards condescending views concerning his writing is apparent in the aptly named article "More on the Literary Snobocracy." Why were the Australian critics so hostile, Upfield asked, when his writing was considered good enough for publication by a London based publisher and was noted favourably by London's *Times Literary Supplement* and New York's *Bookman* (5)? His friends were familiar with his opinions concerning critics who attempted to dictate the terms of cultural good taste. Ewers claimed that after Upfield purchased a Daimler sports car he proudly claimed that "there aren't many literary critics in Australia [who] could manage that" ("From Boundary Rider to Best-seller" 7). Ewers suggested that Upfield's unqualified responses were intensified by the assurance of a steady income from international sales, which provided him with a level of immunity against retaliatory bad reviews (7). The crime writer's belligerence was evident in his accusations that the actions of some members of the literary sphere were driven by self-interest.

This anecdote illustrates Leigh Dale's claims that tensions between the elitist and middlebrow literary spheres were often intense and erupted into vehement debates based on passionate views that sometimes involved personal attacks (7). On multiple occasions Upfield made assertions that bias and favouritism were rife in sections of literary circles. In a 1933 *Sunday Times* article he identified a level of snobbery and nepotism in literary associations. He claimed that the primary focus of some critics was the promotion of their careers and those of their friends and colleagues:

There is no greater toad in the world of literary toadyism than the novelist who reviews novels under his published name. He will select for most favourable notice books written by other reviewer-novelists, praising their work that they in turn will praise his, misleading the public about another's book for his own ultimate gain. I was once asked to remit five pounds to a reviewer-novelist who then would devote half a column to the current novel in a first-class literary journal. The offer was ignored: so was the novel. ("Literary Illusions" 10)

Upfield repeated his accusations of literary nepotism. In "More on the Literary Snobocracy" he claimed that a

writer has two paths from which he must choose. If he wants to earn a living with his pen he will have no evenings to spare for literary meetings ... The study of literature is ever mentally elevating which should be the prime reason for the formation of any literary society. If they embrace other objects—the boosting of mediocre work, self-boosting and relation-boosting; permitting men and women to set themselves up as masters of literature and masters of the art of criticism; and directing public attention to work the merit of which has failed to draw any attention but their own—it is time that some working writer should tell them to go somewhere and take a running jump. (5)

The ire he directed towards supporters of literary writing was long lived.

Patricia Rolfe, a noted journalist and editor, claimed in 1962 that Upfield provocatively claimed that a group of writers were mainly writing for each other and not for the market. In the 'twenties Dalby Davidson and Vance Palmer used to write books. Then they would review

each other's and praise it to the skies. People would buy them and find they were no good, then they wouldn't buy any more Australian books. But most of that is gone these days. (18)

The view that some were inclined to review positively any calibre of writing produced by a select group of writers was supported by Ewers, who suggested that if some supporters of highbrow writing

feel constrained to say anything in a popular book's favour, they do it with a sniff. But when a friend of theirs writes a book, they become instantly eulogistic in the wildest possible manner ... There are quite a lot of this sort of critic in Australia ... No country in the world has so many literary cliques per head of the population as Australia. ("The Australian Bookman: Literary Criticism" 23).

While this may have been the case the irony is that Ewers and Upfield could be accused of supporting each other's work in a similar manner.

The two writers formed a friendship after Ewers wrote a positive review of Upfield's *The Beach of Atonement* (1930) for *The West Australian*. Ewers acknowledged in his autobiography that Upfield "appreciated my favourable and quite lengthy review as one of the first signs of recognition in the country of his adoption" (*Long Enough* 133). This was not an isolated incident as Ewers' reviews of Upfield's novels were consistently positive. His 1932 review of Upfield's novel *Gripped by Drought* (1932) suggested the narrative, one of the few Upfield produced that was not a crime novel, occupied "a place apart in our literature of the outback. We have before had stories of station life, but never one of this intensity" ("Upfield's New Novel" 12). He argued the characters, plot and setting provided such an authentic representation of the hardships endured by farmers that it was

“one of the most revealing books of Australian station life ever written” (12). The support Upfield offered Ewers was more practical in nature.

For a period the two like-minded writers met regularly on Saturday mornings at a Perth cafe (Ewers, “Interview by Shelley Balme” 25). Ewers acknowledged that these meetings were beneficial to his writing career as Upfield provided advice and publishing industry contacts. Ewers was persuaded to contact Upfield’s American agent who secured the publication of *Tales From the Dead Heart* (1944) as *Written in the Sand* (1947) by Dutton and Co (*Long Enough* 243). The eventual cooling of the friendship was mainly due to Upfield’s difficult character traits. Ewers asserted that the 1948 *Walkabout* sponsored expedition the pair undertook with four others was marred by Upfield’s rudeness to hosts, antisocial behaviour and cantankerous moods (246). Upfield’s friends and foes alike frequently found him difficult to deal with.

Upfield’s hostility towards his detractors reached a dramatic climax in *An Author Bites the Dust*. The novel presented a partisan examination of tensions between high and middlebrow writers and critics. It provided him with an opportunity to air his grievances against influential critics and writers. Part of the popular “Bony” crime series, the mystery novel centred on a group of highbrow writers and critics. The main protagonist, the detective-inspector known as “Bony,” travelled through the unfamiliar and inhospitable terrain of Melbourne’s literary realm in order to investigate the murder of one of its influential members. The victim, Mervyn Blake, resided on Melbourne’s outskirts with wife and fellow writer Janet Blake. The characters were members of a prominent literary group that vigorously upheld the tenets of literary fiction.

The occupations and residence of the Blakes ensured that many readers would assume they were modelled on Vance and Nettie Palmer. Mervyn was described as a once popular Australian writer who failed to gain publishing success overseas. After returning to Australia he “stroved to exert his influence on Australian literature so that he would secure an undying place in it” (254). As this character feared being remembered as a mediocre writer he formed a formidable partnership with a like-minded critic. The pair positioned themselves as “joint dictators” of the literary scene but Upfield’s novel classified them as “fitted only to be flunkies at the Court of World Literature” (254). His thinly veiled attack on the Palmers almost resulted in libel action (Ruskin, “Arthur Upfield” 44).

Upfield was pleased with this result as his letter to fellow *Walkabout* contributor and successful author E. V. Timms expressed his delight that *An Author Bites the Dust* achieved the desired aim of annoying “the Palmers and other alleged literary people” (Letter to E. V. Timms). The book cemented Upfield’s reputation as a cantankerous detractor of literary power brokers. An anonymous 1957 *Bulletin* article described him as “generally a little on the defensive against critics who proclaim the purity of the straight forward novel, and this has set Mr. Upfield pretty stiffly up against what he calls the ‘claquers,’ the Australian town-critics who pontificate on literary art” (“Arthur Upfield” 2). Upfield’s refusal to genuflect to those who preached a narrow lexicon of Australian writing was acknowledged in other reviews. A *Digest of World Reading* review from Clem Christesen, the longstanding *Meanjin* editor and unabashed supporter of elite forms of culture (Lee 410), acknowledged that Upfield had used *An Author Bites the Dust* as a means of denigrating critics of commercial fiction. Christesen noted that Upfield

seems scornful of reviewers, and scornful of those who do not appreciate “commercial fiction.” Indeed, it would almost seem that Mr Upfield has written this story to vindicate the commercial writer—and in passing to land a side-kick at Australian Literature (with a capital L), and to pass off a few personal grudges against certain “literary” colleagues. (143)

This review presented an accurate description of Upfield’s intentions as the novel undertook a comparison of literary and middlebrow or “commercial” fiction and concluded in favour of the middlebrow.

*An Author Bites the Dust* depicted the annoyance of acclaimed writers and their supporters at the reluctance of Australian publishers to accept literary novels in equal numbers to commercial fiction. A member of the Blakes’ inner circle claimed that this failing was the result of publishers pandering to the demands of the “modern and now comparatively educated herd. Old time publishers took pride in their part of the production of fine literature. Nowadays they demand sensationalism slickly put across” (2). Upfield’s views concerning literary writing were explicit in his novel. One of the minor characters, a successful crime novelist called Clarence B. Bagshott, defined literary fiction as “a piece of writing executed in a schoolmasterly fashion and yet so lacking in entertainment values that the general public won’t buy it” (125). This cold and rigid writing lacked a strong narrative thread and was in effect a “perfectly constructed skeleton covered with parchment and pigment with watered ink” (11). The character refuted the notion that middlebrow novels that appealed to readers were inherently inferior to literary fiction.

Bagshott claims that “commercial fiction—and this is a term employed by the highbrows—is imaginative writing that easily satisfies publishers and editors



because the public will buy it” (125). The success of commercial writers was ascribed to highly developed storytelling skills (12) that ensured that, while their writing was an imperfectly constructed skeleton, it was entertaining, focused on readers and “covered with healthy flesh and vitalized with good, red blood” (11). Bagshott’s views concerning the tensions between middle and highbrow writing mirrored Upfield’s belief that middlebrow writing should be valued for its skilful production. By extolling the virtues of middlebrow writing and placing more credence in readers’ assessment than the dictates of literary critics, his novel supports Casey’s claim that middlebrow novels from previous periods reveal the complexities in the literary and social landscape (26).

The murder of an elitist literary figure in *An Author Bites the Dust* was not the coup de grace of Upfield’s novel. His ultimate revenge was exacted at the end of the narrative after Bony uncovered that Janet had committed the carefully planned murder of her husband. This revelation was not as shocking as the realisation that Janet, an acclaimed writer, had secretly been publishing highly successful romance novels under the pseudonym I. R. Watts. This situation was not unbelievable during a period in which several literary writers attempted to “moonlight” as commercial writers, but were chagrined to discover that it was not as easy as they anticipated to produce highly successful commercial fiction (Nile, “Literary Democracy” 142). Upfield depicts Janet as one of the few who could produce both literary and middlebrow novels.

The hypocrisy that underpinned a section of the literary sphere, according to Upfield, is revealed in Bony’s realisation that Mervyn had been desperate to conceal the fact that the couple’s main source of income was derived from the royalties of Janet’s middlebrow writing. Mervyn feared being ridiculed and

ostracised by his literary associates if the secret came to light (384) as their views were unequivocal: “There was never yet a best-seller that had any claims to being good literature, literature as understood by the cultured. We are interested ... in Literature with a capital L, not commercial fiction that receives the approval of the common herd” (14). The Blake’s secret deeply embittered Mervyn and as a consequence he made his wife’s life a private hell (398).

Janet became enraged by the lack of recognition she received from her husband on two grounds. She was not given credit for editing his most successful novels or for being a highly successful novelist, yet he became

famous—locally—as an author and critic, on the money earned by my commercial fiction, which he condemned publicly, which his friends condemned, and which was read by nearly all nations of the world. My work became something that could not be mentioned in polite literary circles. His novels were acclaimed as fine contributions to the national literature by people whose work he in turn praised with equal fervour. (385)

The result of Janet’s anger was a sophisticated plan to kill her husband. When she was revealed as both the murderer and I. R. Watts, the strength of the elitist views held by the Blake’s literary group was displayed in the response of one of its members:

I could forgive you for killing Mervyn, I could even admire you for the courage you must have had to do it. But I cannot forgive you, and I never, never shall forgive you for being I. R. Watts, to smear our Australian literature with common fiction. (380)

*An Author Bites the Dust* negatively portrayed literary associations as exclusionary, insular and hypocritical.

The experience of writing this novel appeared to have been a cathartic process for Upfield. Prior to the novel's publication Ewers claimed that almost every letter he received from Upfield expressed the crime writer's contempt for literary critics. After Upfield figuratively murdered a well-known literary critic, referred to by Ewers as "Public Enemy No 1," Ewers detected a perceptible shift in the tone of his letters. Ewers claimed that after the novel's publication Upfield "no longer mentions the critics so often in his letters" ("From Boundary Rider" 7). It is unclear whether Upfield attacked Vance Palmer because he personified all that Upfield detested about influential literary associations, or whether there were specific personal insults he wanted to address. Upfield's view of Palmer's hypocrisy may have stemmed from his transformation from a writer of what Geoffrey Serle describes as "pot-boilers" (n.pag.) to a strong proponent of literary writing. Correspondence between Upfield and Miles Franklin sheds further light on the impetus behind *An Author Bites the Dust*.

Franklin was a prolific correspondent with a range of figures from both sides of the high/middlebrow divide. Her willingness to examine writing critically rather than quickly dismiss middlebrow writing is noted by Nile, who argues that she was "one of the few to see that potential for serious writing might reside in the success of commercial writers" ("Literary Democracy" 140). A range of her letters are examined in Jill Roe's *My Congenials* (1993) and Carole Ferrier's *As Good as a Yarn With You* (1992). Franklin's sympathetic correspondence with Upfield after the publication of *An Author Bites the Dust* (not included by Roe or Ferrier) revealed that Upfield's deep-seated belligerence prompted him to write the novel:

A writer to *Meanjin Papers* expressed opposition to a full paragraph being given my work by John K. Ewers in his *Creative Writing in Australia*, and,

knowing that writer's background and literary associations in Melbourne, I decided, in modern terms, that I had had it. Every time I spoke to a book seller or librarian, everywhere I went, and over the last fifteen years, I was told that the Australian public don't want Australian novels, and my study of effects led to the cause which I outlined in *Author Bites*. I could not smother the conviction that mutual back-slapping of writers who had banded into societies was the cause ... I decided that things were becoming a little too hot. There were other writers, too, people turning out really good jobs, who never were reviewed in the literary pages of the Press. (Letter to Miles Franklin)

Upfield's defence of his controversial novel demonstrated that his writing did not fit the stereotype that labelled middlebrow writing as mundane and respectable (Carter, "Mystery" 173). Upfield's decision to make a stand for writers who could not gain the favour of literary critics and reviewers cast him as a noble defender of middlebrow writing, but in reality he had much to gain financially if this writing gained a greater level of recognition.

Upfield's letter to Franklin called for a broad-based national literature that was transparent and democratic. He claimed that "when a national literature is controlled, suppressed, by a Hitler or by an organised coterie of second-raters in what we think is a democratic country, then someone must smash the china even though like a bull" (Letter to Miles Franklin). Upfield's assumption of the role of middlebrow champion was "the only way I could contribute my mite to the loosening of a kind of Fascist grip on Australian writers, a grip maintained by third-rate novelists who had set themselves up as dictators of what should and must not be recognised" (Letter to Miles Franklin). Upfield's bold accusations and

colourful language make entertaining reading, but their real value lies in the focus they place on tensions and anxieties that dominated Australia's literary sphere in the mid-twentieth century.

Correspondence between Franklin and Upfield demonstrated their shared desire to see a wide range of literature examine uniquely Australian experiences. Marjorie Barnard's biography of Franklin focused on the writer's preoccupation with rural Australian tropes, stating that "Franklin, like her hero Joseph Furphy, was Australian to the core and gave back to her countrymen their own image in the most acceptable form" (158). The same might be said of Upfield. The correspondence between Upfield and Franklin reveals that both writers did not appreciate writing, especially literary writing, that did not undertake this endeavour even if it was praised by critics. Upfield's letter to Franklin outlined his determined but failed attempts to read and appreciate fiction acclaimed by critics and reviewers: "I read their books ... with grim determination. At first I felt my own education was at fault. Then I was doubtful of my sanity. If this stuff was first class literature, then there must be something terribly wrong with me" (Letter to Miles Franklin). In reply, Franklin outlined a similar experience.

Franklin admitted she "had dismissed a certain writer as trash, and then he was so extolled by the cognoscenti—that I felt like you and hurried off to the Mitchell to re-read. But ten minutes was enough for me" (Letter to Arthur Upfield). Franklin's opposition to views held by the literary elite was evident in her disparagement of shifting assessments concerning Furphy's *Such Is Life*. She remarked that "no university ginks acclaimed the dear old man in his life time nor gave him the joy of association ... yet today the high-brows burble about him," which demonstrated that "no one knows what will become a classic and last.

Things jeered at in one generation are treasures in another” (Letter to Arthur Upfield). Correspondence between the pair affirmed that the edicts of reviewers and critics were fallible. Ewers also expressed doubts regarding the literary merit of acclaimed writing in his newspaper columns. On one occasion he responded unfavourably to acclaimed modernist poetry:

The verses are modernist in treatment and outlook, and, if obscurity is any criterion, their merit is high. After several intensive readings I have arrived at the meanings of most of them, but must confess to an inability to interpret several high-sounding phrases. (“The Australian Bookman” September 1932 15)

The views of Ewers and Franklin demonstrated that Upfield was not alone in his condemnation of the exclusionary tendencies of those situated at the top of the literary hierarchy, but he was certainly one of the most vocal.

The claim that the literary elite were partisan and discriminatory highlighted that Upfield was not a mundane or sycophant crime writer who feared for his reputation. He was outspoken and lent his support to middlebrow narratives that focused on outback Australia and were enjoyed by a wide readership. Readers were important to Upfield as he acknowledged that he relied on their support, but money was a taboo subject amongst writers who placed a higher value on aesthetics. *An Author Bites the Dust* exposed tensions between those who believed literature should primarily be appreciated for its form, skill and aesthetic beauty, and those who viewed writing as the basis of a career.

### **Aesthetics versus commercialism**

Upfield and Ewers acknowledged the commercial nature of their writing and the financial difficulties they experienced as professional writers. In “Literary Illusions” Upfield disparaged a general reticence to discuss candidly the financial aspects of writing. He claimed the topic had

been shrouded in more mystery than surrounds the activities of a secret society. Authors will discuss their publisher’s sales statements with none except their agent, and the only public estimate of an author’s financial success is based, falsely, on the broadcast value of his estate assessed for probate. (10)

Ewers was less concerned with secrecy than he was with the dominance of English and American texts in the Australian publishing industry.

Craig Munro and John Curtin describe mid-twentieth Australia as swamped “with a veritable flood of imported product” (4). *The Great Australian Paradox* presented Ewers’ concern regarding the difficulties faced by Australian writers. He claimed Australia’s “national literature is being stifled by the wholesale use of cheap ‘copy’” (10) that placed emerging writers at a distinct disadvantage:

The difficulties facing a young writer in Western Australia are enough to make him forego writing for ever. There is no avenue in this state for new creative writing. He must send his work to the Eastern States and there he finds but a handful of papers devoted exclusively to Australian writing. (10)

This had long been an issue for Australian writers attempting to support themselves on an income derived solely from writing careers. Dymphna Cusack’s 1949 letter to Franklin revealed a sense of jealousy concerning the success of expatriate writer Christina Stead, whom Cusack suggested would have struggled to achieve a similar level of success had she stayed in Australia. Cusack expressed a sense of

frustration that the majority of writers who stayed in Australia endured much disappointment and struggled to earn a living from their writing (237). The correspondence between Franklin and Ewers, who shared an interest in rehabilitating the writing and reputation of Joseph Furphy, revealed the financial hardships faced by Australian writers.

Franklin's 1951 letter to Ewers and his wife depicted the Australian publishing industry as "a hard row for writers to hoe these days ... Inflation has reduced my tiny income to little more than enough for food" (Letter to Jean and Keith Ewers). The letter described Ewers as fortunate for not being solely reliant on the income he derived from writing. She envisaged that Ewers enjoyed a sense of security from being able to obtain work as a teacher (Letter to Jean and Keith Ewers). Ewers' teaching positions provided stability but his correspondence showed they created other problems as they reduced the available time he had to write; he struggled to balance his desire to write novels with the temptation to accept non-fiction projects that offered a guaranteed income. His 1947 letter to writer Bill Harney, a well-known outback identity, Patrol Officer of the Native Affairs Branch 1940-47, writer and *Walkabout* contributor, outlined that he had accepted a lucrative commission to write the history of the Fremantle City Council as "it might lead to other similar assignments later, when I am less busy than I am now, and glad of the shekels" (Letter to Bill Harney). The commission interfered in Ewers' creative writing as the exhaustion he suffered after completing the project caused him to defer his acceptance of a Commonwealth Literary Fund grant to write two novels. Decades later disappointment remained that he failed to publish the planned novels; his letter to writer Lyn Brown acknowledged that "I'm one of



the bad boys who didn't produce the goods" (Letter to Lyn Brown November 1972).

Ewers' correspondence consistently addressed financial concerns and the impact they played on his writing career. His 1954 letter to writer Margaret Trist revealed the high level of risk he believed was involved in writing novels:

I feel like sticking to non-fiction for, say, two more books before venturing again into a novel. It certainly seems to sell better. Personally I feel it's far less valuable culturally, and I shan't be really happy until I have another novel on the market. (Letter to Margaret Trist 1954)

It took another two years to have another novel published: *Who Rides on the River?* reached the market in 1956. His 1964 letter to Trist admitted the lure of lucrative non-fiction projects, especially English textbooks, proved too strong to resist. Although writing textbooks was exacting work he claimed that it promised to be "much more lucrative than novels. Once established, they can go on and on and on" (Letter to Margaret Trist 1964). Munro and Curtain identify the expansion of educational publishing in the post-World War II period as a "profitable enterprise" (8). Ewers' school texts include the *English for High Schools*, *English for Today* and *Exercises in English* series published in the 1950s; *Take 23: Short Stories Round the World* (1971); and several collaborations with Deidre E. Weston including *Passport to Understanding* (1969) and *Passport to Experience* (1970). Despite the income generated from educational writing, Ewers' fluctuating financial situation had not changed by 1966 when a subsequent letter to Trist outlined another non-fiction project undertaken for financial gain, in this case a piece of criticism concerning Australian literature for an American encyclopaedia (Letter to Margaret Trist 1966).

The irony was that the income Ewers derived from non-fiction royalties made him ineligible for a Australian Literary Board pension. A 1972 letter to Brown acknowledged his financial difficulties:

I'm not too flush just now. Trying to live on writing in Australia is tough, but what with royalties from textbooks and anthologies I've managed so far to be ineligible for a pension. Not that I wouldn't take one if I could! But royalties are variable things. They come in at intervals of many months and now and then I look dubiously at my savings bank balance and my mounting overdraft and wonder how I'll exist till the next royalties ... At the beginning of this month I was expecting a very small cheque for royalties on an earlier and now superseded set of textbooks. Instead I got a request from the publisher for the repayment of about \$60 because they'd overpaid me last year! That hurt. (Letter to Lyn Brown [July] 1972)

Ewers' relief at eventually being granted an Australian Literary Board pension was evident in his 1973 letter to Brown (Letter to Lyn Brown October 1973). His correspondence reveals difficulties faced by professional writers in the mid-twentieth century, especially those who applied a measure of pragmatism to their careers. Ewers embraced every opportunity to gain publication and further his career rather than adopt a narrow aesthetic focus. This point of difference between commercial and literary writers was one from which Ewers, Idriess and Upfield did not resile.

Idriess made no secret of his desire to give up itinerant work and establish himself as a full-time writer. This heightened his antagonism towards the literary establishment as bad reviews could negatively affect his sales figures. Idriess' 1960 letter to the journalist and reviewer known as Jayem, claims that the

Australian author has a great deal to battle against, lack of population and the full force of overseas competition ... hence those of us Aussies battling for a bit more than a crust are deeply appreciative to those reviewers who give us a decent review ... for as you know, our friendly enemies the critics do not pull their punches ... you're not one of my friends who write "with the material he's got it's a pity he can't write!" (Letter to Jayem)

Upfield also made a successful transition from itinerant worker to professional writer despite the many financial obstacles Australian writers faced. His 1930 letter to Whyte expressed his disappointment that Perth booksellers could not obtain enough copies of his novel *Beach of Atonement* (1930) to meet the demand. He claimed that the realisation was "enough to make a man weep. Here I am struggling with camels in the bush when I should be selling tens of thousands of books in a city, and the fools in the city simply don't know how to sell books" (Letter to E. Verco Whyte June 1930). Upfield's desire to advance his writing career ensured that he was unabashed in the promotion of his own writing.

Upfield supported his publisher's promotional newspaper advertisements despite being aware that some writers viewed such undertakings as coarse and unrefined: "It is, I am aware, the fashion among highbrow authors whose work has never received such notice from a book society, to sneer at this method of increasing public interest in books. Any method of increasing public interest in books is good" ("Beyond the Mirage" 347). Upfield capitalised on the popularity and income potential of his crime series by developing the personae of the main protagonist. In 1948 he sent Christmas cards depicting a portrait of the character on the front and a greeting attributed to Bony on the card's interior. An example is

held by the Baillieu Library, so too is a response from a recipient of one of these cards.

A 1948 letter from Richard Kennedy, a representative of the Foreign Department of MCA Management in New York, stated that “I would like to take this opportunity to ask you to express to ‘Bony’ my thanks for his very kind Holiday Greetings and to wish him from me the heartiest of Season’s Greetings and a new year filled with interesting and provocative adventures” (Letter to Arthur W. Upfield). Bony’s personae was further cultivated by his “contribution” of the introduction to Upfield’s biography *Follow My Dust* (1957), written by Upfield’s second partner Jessica Hawke. The biography was published after Upfield’s autobiography was rejected by publishers. As the book has the appearance of a collection of Upfield’s anecdotes rather than a critical biography, the biography appears to be a demonstration of Upfield’s reluctance to lose an opportunity of maximising his literary income and an opportunity for self-promotion.

The willingness of Ewers and Upfield to admit that financial concerns influenced the style and content of their fiction and non-fiction would have been considered gauche by those who valued the aesthetic nature of literature more than its commercial value. The divide that separated the high and middlebrow spheres was demonstrated by the usage of the terms “commercial writer” or “commercial fiction” as a term of derision. Casey states that middlebrow writing was “tainted by its close association with the consumer marketplace, wherein economic capital presumably trumps cultural capital” (28). Upfield admitted that financial necessities influenced his decision to undertake a number of writing projects for monetary gain. A 1934 letter to Whyte outlined that after leaving a position at the *Herald* he was approached by a wealthy pastoralist to write his biography. Upfield

stated that he would accept the commission on the basis that the pastoralist would pay three hundred pounds for six months work. When these terms were quickly accepted Upfield wryly noted his disappointment at not asking for a payment of one thousand pounds (Letter to E. Verco Whyte November 1934).

Upfield acknowledged that financial concerns sustained his commitment to the Bony crime series: “People say I should write ‘straight’ novels. I wrote ‘straight’ novels and made no money out of them. I am quite happy with the sort of books I write” (Rolfe 16). He certainly enjoyed a level of success that most Australian writers could not replicate but he did not classify himself as rich. Instead, he claimed that at times it seemed fame was the only reward he received from his writing career (16). This view led to his adoption of the following phrase as a letterhead on his stationary: “All fame and no bloody money.” In reference to the motto Upfield claimed in a letter that “as this paper heading infers, we haven’t much money but do enjoy an adventurous life” (Letter to E. V. Timms). The publishing success achieved by a number of outback-focused writers was noted by journalist and philologist Sidney J. Baker in a *Sydney Morning Herald* article, where he commented on the increasing number of outback themed fiction and non-fiction on the market:

The influence of the reading market cannot be ignored, of course. Far from becoming bored with outback tales, many Australian readers continue to show enthusiasm for them ... hence, the fact that Ernestine Hill, Jack McLaren and a few comparable non-fictional observers of our outback have often been more convincing than the novelists. (“City Themes” 82)

A shift in the balance of power from the literary sphere to the consumer-driven middlebrow market was met with a level of resistance that was manifested in the

reluctance of critics and the academy to engage seriously with middlebrow writing. Ewers' journalism and literary criticism sought to address this failure and promote the development of a varied and inclusive national literature.

### **Defending the national literature**

Ewers was widely recognised as an outspoken supporter of Australian writing (Durack 21). He was less confrontational in his endeavours than Upfield but his desire to see the continued development of a distinct and valued national literature that celebrated Australian tropes was public, consistent and occasionally argumentative. Ewers was supportive of Australian publishers who increasingly embraced Australian texts ("Interview by Shelley Balme" 33), but he yearned to see more Australian readers recognise their cultural and literary heritage. By focusing on the inherent value within a broad and inclusive national literature he rejected the dominant notion that a cultural void existed in Australia, or that this textual space should be filled by a pastiche of cultural expressions that originated from other nations. In "Australiana: A Review of the Year 1930" Ewers stated that

It is not so long ago that people were saying: "Australian literature! I didn't know there was one." And indeed their ignorance was not surprising. For too long we have been content to lean on the prestige of those literary pioneers, Clarke, Boldrewood, and Lawson. It was somehow felt that the colourful days of the past had gone forever, that there was nothing in our national life or characteristics essentially different from those of any other country. But that has changed. To-day, in spite of economic troubles and political unrest, we have grown aware of ourselves, and this awareness is made apparent by the flow of Australian writings. (4)

The article encouraged writers and readers to recognise the achievements of their nation's writers: "It remains for us, as Australians, to grow out of that rather ridiculous inferiority complex with which we have suffered for so long with regard to the works of our native writers. That achieved, the future of our national literature is assured" (4). Ewers' views illustrate Carter's claim that Australia was not simply a "passive recipient of cultural imports" (*Always Almost Modern* xii). Ewers was actively engaged in a public dialogue that consistently fore-grounded the worth of Australian writing.

He frequently aired his views concerning Australia's literary heritage. The impetus behind "The Australian Bookman," his weekly column for Perth's *The Daily News* which ran between 1932-33, was to promote and support Australian writing. In the column Ewers disparaged what he perceived as a slavish desire to follow the edicts of literary adjudicators:

In these days when taste in reading is largely dictated by book clubs and reviewers of worldwide repute, it would seem at first sight that fashions would have little influence on book sales, yet it is a fact that people read what it is fashionable to read. In America particularly, you are a social failure unless you have read the latest recommendation of the X.Y.Z. Book Club. ("The Australian Bookman" August 1932 13)

Ewers was aware of the influence book clubs held over many inquiring readers. Janice Radway argues the cultural education many sought via the American Book-of-the-Month Club fed "a shared wish for cultural mastery and the prestige that seemed to accompany it" (22), but Ewers encouraged readers to forgo the classics of other nations and embrace all forms of Australian writing that contributed to a distinct national literature.

Ewers never tired from promoting writing that engaged with outback scenes and communities. His *Daily News* column praised Idriess' *Lasseter's Last Ride* (1931), Aeneas Gunn's *We of the Never Never* (1908) and a selection of other texts for having

that essential difference that stamps them as "Made in Australia." It may be debated as to what constitutes this essential difference, but it is safe to say it is more easily distinguishable in the outback rather than in the city. For example, our city-bred office worker is not as essentially different from his English cousin as are the prospector, the teamster, the stockman. If, therefore, we are seeking a book with the very bloodstream of the real Australia in its pages, we must go to stories of the outback. ("The Australian Bookman" October 1932 14)

Rather than disparage Australian culture as inherently inferior, Ewers repetitively expressed his admiration for writers who depicted a unique sense of place and vividly brought the nation's stories to life in a manner that was accessible to general readers.

Ewers' column complied with the trend in middlebrow writing to be reader focused (Carter, "*All About Books*" 333). He praised Idriess' vibrant representations of outback Australia that resonated with readers:

He can thrill you with human endeavour, with battle against great odds, even though you know that the struggle itself is probably a drab affair with few gleams of reward to lighten its monotony. He can enrapture you with a desert landscape, even though you know it comprises but a dead level plain and a sprinkling of harsh scrub, and arched by an impeccable cloudless desert sky. It must not be inferred from this that he is writing mere namby-



pamby with pretty, soft platitudes thrown into sugar-coat pill. He can be a stark realist when he likes. ("The Australian Bookman" June 1932 12)

Idriess' rollicking tales were not presented as mindless literary entertainment but as a means of engaging with the image of nation. Ewers' analysis did not simply classify Idriess' books as highly profitable commodities in the domestic book market: he recognised that successful non-literary writing contained an inherent cultural value. This view was common in middlebrow writing as Carter suggests that "middlebrow institutions were typically invested in maximising the occasions for cultural consumption while simultaneously certifying 'quality'" (*All About Books* 333). Much of Ewers' critical writing undertook a similar endeavour. It positively promoted a diverse range of Australian literature, both high and middlebrow, that provided readers with opportunities to explore all that made their nation distinct.

Ewers' literary criticism refuted the period's pervading sense of cultural inferiority and recognised the indelible imprint created by a complex interplay between landscape and history. He explored the bond between people, environment and identity in *The Great Australian Paradox* where he called on the education system to place a greater emphasis on Australian literature and landscapes. The treatise outlined his desire that children who passed through the nation's education systems might view themselves as Australians rather than displaced Britons. Ewers lamented that

the Australian environment is incidental to other teaching, instead of being the main bias of the child's preparation for life. As a result, our children are emptied into Australia's civilian life not fully equipped for the important

duties of Australian citizenship. Nor, in adult life, is the deficiency remedied. (9)

He argued that a contributing factor to this disturbing trend was the inability of writers who attempted to reveal the Australian scene to readers to “find space in magazines and newspapers that should be devoted to helping us to a better understanding of ourselves taken up by overseas matter” (9). The dominance of British and American writing in the period’s domestic literary sphere has been examined by Carter who notes the overwhelming presence of “imported books and book talk” (*All About Books* 331). In this environment periodicals including *Walkabout* provided writers with a valuable source of income (Carter and Osborne 239). The magazine’s focus on Australia’s environment, culture and history was greatly admired by Ewers (“Discovering Australia Though *Walkabout*” 45).

*Tell the People* repeated Ewers’ appeal to writers to engage with the environment as he viewed it as a symbol of Australia’s distinctiveness. The essay did not countenance forms of nationalism that did not draw strength from the power inherent in the Australian landscape. Ewers claimed that despite the increasing urbanisation of Australian society the natural environment or landscape will remain

the background of our lives, the source of our economic strength our activity, our national wealth. Even more, it is the source of our cultural well-being, from which we derive a spiritual strength, no matter how far geography may remove us from it personally. Australia is a vast and varied continent. No man may know intimately more than the corner he inhabits, but he derives from the country as a whole. He may never see mulga or

Spinifex, salt-bush or tree-fern ... But these things are his undeniable heritage. (46)

Ewers' essay refuted the notion that it was necessary for a modern Australian nation to cast aside or disparage its cultural and literary legacy. He suggested that it was an easy but misguided exercise "to argue that because Australia is becoming increasingly urban, a book set in rural conditions which no longer exist can have little value for us at this stage of our national development" (19). The example he adopted to illustrate this point was Furphy's *Such Is Life*, a novel once disparaged by critics for its bucolic focus.

A simplistic reading of Furphy's novel might conclude that it is a nostalgic tale of outback life, however, Ewers considered the novel's depiction of tensions and turmoil between squatters and bullock drivers as an insightful examination of settler history and the universal struggle against inequality (*Tell the People* 22). He claimed that outback literature could make a valuable contribution to the nation's definitions of home and identity:

Australia stands at the threshold of nationalism in an era of internationalism. There are those who would deny Australia the right to a nationalism of her own. In so doing, they overlook the fact that internationalism is founded on integral national parts. (14)

Ewers was proud of the distinct elements that comprised Australia's cultural heritage. He refused to ascribe to the "cultural cringe" and did not tire of expressing his support for literature that sought to examine what it meant to be Australian.

In contrast to Upfield, Ewers moved comfortably within the Western Australian literary sphere and enjoyed a position of some influence in the state's

literary associations. Rather than seek to ingratiate himself within this sphere by accepting dominant views, Ewers advocated for the development of a greater appreciation of Australian literature. This endeavour was evident in his presentation of a series of lectures to an Adult Education class concerning Australian literature, an event that would not have been deemed important to those focused on literary aesthetics rather than general readers. Ewers' involvement in the lecture series was part of a concerted effort to promote the profile of Australian writing during a period in which schools and universities did not afford Australian literature a significant measure of attention. Dale notes that "at many institutions until quite recently, the study of Australian literature was regarded as a slightly disreputable activity" (3), but this widespread view did not daunt Ewers. After the conclusion of his lecture series he gained the support of publisher Georgian House to use his lecture material as the basis of *Creative Writing in Australia*.

Ewers' literary survey was aimed at general readers who wanted to learn more about their nation's literary tradition. The 1945 edition was overt in its support for the development of a distinct Australian literature and the need to reduce an

uneasy reluctance to admit that we are nationals of a new nation ... in short, that we are Australians and that being an Australian is something different from being a national of any other nation. The Americans gave up this stupid wrangling something less than a century ago. It's high time we abandoned it too, and settled to be what history and circumstances have made us. (13)

The text applauded writing that did not seek validation in international acclaim or attempted to replicate respected national literatures from Europe or America.

Instead, it mapped the development of Australian literature through bush ballads, novels, poetry and short stories. The publication of this broad literary survey was a significant achievement in an era in which many viewed Australian literature as vastly inferior to the British stream from which it had sprung.

The contrasting views of some members of the academy and literary associations with those who were fierce devotees of an Australian national literature were the subject of correspondence between Ewers and Franklin, a nationalist writer who shared many of Ewers views. Franklin is identified by Dale as a strong and persistent critic of the academy (7; 155). Her 1951 letter recounted her irritation with several outspoken detractors of Australian writing who attended a dinner held by Sydney's English Association (Letter to Jean and Keith Ewers). American Professor Bruce Sutherland, chair of English literature at the Pennsylvanian State University and visiting Fulbright scholar ("Encouragement for Writers Urged" 7), gave a presentation about his desire to establish a scholarship to support the study of Australian literature. Franklin was angered that she was required to defend the worth of Australian literature and Sutherland's attempts to encourage Australian academics to study and appreciate their national literature (Letter to Jean and Keith Ewers).

Franklin objected to the views of those she described as "cultural inspectors" who deemed that the visiting Professor's undertaking was futile because Australia did not have a literary tradition worth examining. She claimed that James Meagher, the Irish solicitor and raconteur who chaired the meeting in the absence of president Robert Howarth, "forensically rebuked me with a flowery brief" that suggested Australian literature had yet to earn its right to keep company with the great writing produced by the Greeks, Americans and Irish (Letter to Jean and

Keith Ewers). This was not the only occasion on which Franklin sought a sympathetic response from Ewers concerning tensions between supporters and detractors of Australian writing. A 1952 letter from Franklin to Ewers warns him that “we can’t yet retire from our undergraduate tub thumping, as someone once called my insistence upon the right of Australian literature to be unashamedly Australian, instead of imitative” (Letter to Keith Ewers). Ewers’ willingness to disagree publically with the views of influential members of the literary sphere is evident in a reference contained in Franklin’s letter concerning his recent confrontation with members of the English Department of the University of Western Australia.

In March 1952 Ewers wrote a letter to *The West Australian* that disparaged the proposed 1953 syllabus for Junior and Leaving English compiled by the English Department. The basis of Ewers’ concern was the list’s inclusion of only one Australian book; a collection of radio plays. The dominance of international writing ensured that the suggested syllabus was an anathema to the longstanding enthusiast of Australian writing. Ewers’ outrage was heightened by the English department’s previous admission that “Australian children should be introduced to some Australian literature during their school years” (Letter 15 March 1952 5). His letter expressed his frustration that it remained necessary to labour the point that post-Federation children should be encouraged to read Australian writing. He reminded *The West Australian* readers that “a proper reading of any country’s literature helps to fit a person to that environment and is therefore a training in citizenship, if nothing else. Apparently, the University is reluctant to concede this fact” (5).

The English department was swift to issue an objection to Ewers' criticism. L. R. Burrows, the person responsible for the proposed syllabus, responded to what they termed as Ewers' vociferous leap to defend Australian literature by claiming that the syllabus was purely provisional and designed to guide the debate of a meeting of teachers and examiners, the purpose of which was to agree on a final list (8). Burrows' letter not only took Ewers to task for having the bad manners to air his views publically rather than at the appropriate forum, it also suggested there was little need for Ewers' outburst because Australian writing would feature more prominently on future lists due to import restrictions. This claim demonstrated that Burrows had missed Ewers' point because it suggested that the syllabus would only focus on Australian writing when it was forced to. Burrows' response also supports Dale's claim that "lip-service was paid to the idea that Australian literature should be studied in Australian universities" (160). Ewers would not be placated, shamed into submission or distracted from his assertion that Australian writing was not afforded the level of recognition it deserved in the syllabus.

Undeterred by Burrows' rebuke, Ewers sent another dispatch to the newspaper, stating that he chose not to wait for the private meeting between teachers and examiners because he wanted "to draw public attention to the comparative indifference of the English department of the University to the significance of Australian literature" (Letter 20 March 1952 15). He refused to keep discussions concerning the syllabus private and presented the newspaper's readers with his version of the outcome of the meeting and his disappointment with the University:

I also attended the meeting and had the pleasure of observing that a majority of teachers and examiners present disapproved of the attitude of

the English department. So much so, that motions urging that some aspects of Australian poetry and prose should, as a matter of course, be included in the Junior and Leaving syllabus each year were carried unanimously. In these matters, one naturally looks to the University for leadership and expects that it should seek by criticism and study to encourage an interest in the literature of this young country. (15)

Ewers' criticism prompted Alec King the chief examiner and future professor at the University of Western Australia to enter the public debate.

King's letter supported Burrows by claiming that Ewers' original letter should not have been written because the provisional list of books to be included in the syllabus was a private draft document for the perusal of teachers and examiners who, with the Public Examinations Board, would approve a final list of texts. King disagreed with Ewers' description of the meeting and suggested the claim that the majority of those attendees

disapproved of the attitude of the English department with regard to the significance of Australian literature is amusing fantasy ... I respect Mr.

Ewers' fanatical zeal on behalf of Australian literature; I do not respect his attempts to mislead the public about the attitude of the English department to the significance of Australian literature. (Letter 10)

King presented Ewers' support for Australian literature as a form of parochialism in which that the English department refused to partake. The academic claimed that the focus of the department was not the promotion of Australian literature; instead its first duty was to present the best work of the best literary minds to its students "so that an inferior and ignorant parochialism may have as little chance to grow as



possible” (10). Ewers would not agree that Australian writers had little of value to contribute to the students’ education.

Undeterred by King’s rebuke Ewers wrote yet another missive that criticised King’s paternalistic inference that the English department only presented students with material they deemed to be the best in the world:

Surely he would not wish one to infer from this that all the best in the world has been exclusively thought and said by English writers? His department is not concerned with writers of other countries, but with what has been best thought and said by English writers. But should it not also be concerned with the best that has been said and thought by Australian writers? (Letter 27 March 1952 17)

The letter ridiculed King for suggesting that he feared “for the quality of our thoughts if we study Australian literature” (17). It also refuted suggestions that he was fanatically focused on Australian writing as it claimed that he did not promote the study of Australian literature to the exclusion of English writing, instead he advocated an inclusive view that “a judicious combination of the best in English and Australian writing in University study courses might enrich us all” (17). The public dispute ended with both sides adhering to their opposing views. The academics whom Dale describes as “the guardians of culture” were fierce opponents of a cultural shift away from Britain (190).

The public disagreement between Ewers and the English Department of the University of Western Australia was one of many between supporters of Australian writing and the academy. Dale outlines a public debate in the pages of the *Age* newspaper and *Meanjin* concerning the curriculum at Melbourne University in the mid 1930s (151). She suggests that the reticence of the academy to support the

study of Australian writing was in part due to its adherence to an Anglophile vision that was informed by English history and culture as a means of “writing-over” a colonial past and to maintain the power base of the cultural elite (190). A confluence of factors ensured that change within educational institutions was slow to occur despite an increasing amount of pressure exerted by those situated outside the academy.

A reader of *The West Australian* leapt to Ewers’ defence in his debate with the University of Western Australia. Kathleen King claimed that Ewers should “be commended for the stand he has taken in defence of Australian literature. There seems to be much apathy towards our own authors ... Our writers tell the story of our country and our children cannot know their country unless they read its story” (10). While the recognition and support for Australian writing was growing, individual readers and schools did not embrace the first edition of Ewers’ literary survey *Creative Writing in Australia* as the book did not sell widely. Ewers admitted that it “dragged its feet along” for ten years until he received a letter from Georgian House which outlined their desire to republish a revised and updated edition (“Interview by Shelley Balme” 44).

Baker’s review of the second and revised 1956 edition for the *Sydney Morning Herald* acknowledged Ewers’ support for the further development of a distinct rather than derivative national literature. Baker stated the “book is based on a firm conviction that Australian literature is something apart from English Literature—emerging from that source, it is true, but now possessing qualities of its own which entitle it to independent consideration” (“Creative Writing in Australia” 17). The scant amount of consideration that had been paid to Australian writing was acknowledged by Baker’s claim that there were few “substantial sources of

modern reference to creative writing in this country” (17). Baker complimented Ewers’ survey for its comprehensive nature and identified its appeal to students and those who had a general interest in Australian literature. Ewers’ survey was described as approachable and readable in style compared to F. T. McCartney’s version of E. Morris Miller’s *Australian Literature* (1956) (17). This may be viewed as a compliment regarding Ewers’ writing skills but it was most likely also a reference to his status as a middlebrow writer, journalist and teacher positioned outside the academy. The survey was a bold undertaking without the sanction of the academy. Ewers acknowledged that “academics either condemned it out of hand or ignored it altogether” (*Long Enough* 243). The relative obscurity of *Creative Writing in Australia* compared to *Australian Literature* and H. M. Green’s *Australian Literature 1900-1950* (1951) illustrated the difficulty faced by those situated outside the literary sphere to gain critical traction, yet the survey was a clear presentation of the writer’s belief that he had as much to contribute to a discourse concerning Australian literature as the academy.

The revised 1956 edition of Ewers’ *Creative Writing in Australia* placed great importance on literature’s ability to examine the universal via “the purely local conditions in which people live. In actual fact, the understanding and appreciation of universal values may be clearer for the people concerned when this is done” (11). The literary survey recognised literature as a medium in which symbols and images facilitated an exploration of domestic and universal themes, and encouraged Australian writers to explore the developing sense of nationhood and what it meant to be Australian (196). His 1966 edition of *Creative Writing in Australia* proudly identified a steady growth of a critical and reflective body of Australian writing:

Our poets, novelists and short story writers are experimenting with form and style and their work is attracting increased attention, both here and overseas. This book shows the widening horizons—from the limited vision of the “colonial” novelists and poets, through various stages of development to the deeper personal interpretations of present-day writers. (6)

Ewers supported the further development of a national self-consciousness despite being aware this was not a popular concept amongst some who embraced modernity. In 1973 he lamented to Brown that “it seems writers of any other country—America, USA, Germany, France, Russia, Italy—can be as self-consciously national as they like, but not the poor Australian writer” (Letter to Lyn Brown March 1973). This claim suggested that literature was a powerful cultural medium when it provided the reader with a fresh insight into the constructs of place and identity.

While many literary critics identified a lack of sophistication in mid-twentieth-century Australian writing, the published and un-published writing of Upfield and Ewers revealed their strong convictions that non-literary writing made an important contribution to the Australian literary lexicon. Both valued Australian writing that engaged with the settler past and domestic preoccupations. This view led Upfield to pay tribute to Whelan’s passion for collecting Australian books in a letter, claiming that “the furrow you have set your hand to is a splendid one, one of such infinitely greater value to Australian literature than all the efforts of the harping critics who seem to think that nothing Australian is of any worth” (Letter to Philip Whelan). *An Author Bites the Dust* was the culmination of Upfield’s anger concerning the literary establishment’s elitist tendencies and attempts to emulate the acclaimed literature produced by admired Western nations. In a similar manner,

*Creative Writing in Australia* was a demonstration of Ewers' desire to applaud and promote Australia's literary heritage. His endorsement of writing that embraced Australian tropes, and Upfield's aggressive support for middlebrow writing, demonstrated their refusal to acquiesce to their relegation to an inferior literary classification. Both believed that writing that was skilfully crafted and entertained general readers was capable of engaging with complex themes.

## Chapter Two

### Ion Idriess: Pride and Paradox

Ion “Jack” Llewellyn Idriess (1898-1979) enjoyed a long period of celebrity as one of Australia’s most successful writers. His thrilling tales concerning outback life were often based on personal experience or the stories and histories he gathered on extensive journeys throughout northern and central Australia. Travel through remote regions provided Idriess with an awareness of the ambivalent nature of outback landscapes. The terrain he described in his 1934 *Walkabout* article “The Kimberleys” was dominated by paradoxes; it was a “land of waterless rivers, yet turbulent floods. Land of the dry, yet of the wet. Of grasses that tower high over man and beast, yet wither fast and fade away. Soil that will grow almost anything if only it has water, yet the seasonal rainfall is large” (32). The landscape promised white settlements much but on numerous occasions it refused to yield many of its riches. This was a region that was a conflicting source of white pride and unease (32).

Idriess suggested that the landscape, and by inference its people, were resistant to simplistic description (34). This was certainly true of Australia’s race relations which were fraught with complexity and ambiguity. Aspects of Indigenous culture were used by writers to depict a distinct national identity (see John K. Ewers’ adoption of an Aboriginal-styled connection to country in Chapter Five), yet this ancient society was widely denigrated as primitive and inferior. Australian society considered itself to be highly civilised and expressed pride in its achievements yet it also failed to provide Aborigines with basic rights, services and opportunities. Idriess’ suggestion that all may not be what it appeared at first

glance formed part of a trend in 1920s and 30s fiction to examine “the particular realities of Australian life, and to construct, as well as challenge, mythologies of reality” (Strauss 121).

One of the most noted examples was Katharine Susannah Prichard’s *Coonardoo* (1929) which examined a competing and mutual sense of attraction and repulsion between black and white in outback Australia. J. J. Healy claims the novel’s bold engagement with race stimulated a noticeable increase in the literary interest paid to Aborigines (171), as evidenced in the writings of Mary Gilmore, William Hatfield, Henrietta Drake-Brockman and Xavier Herbert. Herbert’s acclaimed novel *Capricornia* (1938) provides an insight into tensions surrounding race and belonging. The book is praised for its attempt to immerse the reader in a world where Aborigines form such an integral part that the “white population is seen to participate in the same human existence of the Aborigine” (154). Writers from subsequent decades were also adept at providing discomfiting images of settler history and the disenfranchisement of Aborigines. Kerry Goldsworthy makes special mention of Eleanor Dark, Leonard Man, Dymphna Cusack and Patrick White because they undertook nuanced examinations of settler history and cross-cultural contact (124).

The contribution of middlebrow writers to a literary discourse concerning race has not been given a similar level of attention to that of acclaimed novelists. Idriess’ writing has not been subject to detailed analysis (Rolls, “Finding Fault” 182), yet he was a prolific writer whose books sold in such large numbers that they were a pervasive presence in Australian households for many decades. Adam Shoemaker argues that Idriess’ ability to reach a wide reading audience ensures that his work should be subject to further critical analysis: “popular literature is just

as important, and deserves as much critical attention, as the literature of the educated elite” (7). What can an examination of Idriess’ writing add to our knowledge of mid-twentieth-century race relations? This chapter argues that his fiction and non-fiction critically examined racial tensions in a contested postcolonial space and influenced the mid-twentieth-century national imaginary. This view is at odds with those held by many critics, including Shoemaker, who suggests that Idriess’s writing was supportive of white hegemony and largely unsympathetic towards Indigenous people (8).

While Shoemaker adheres to the view that Idriess’ writing presented all that was abhorrent in the period’s race relations, this chapter argues that Idriess’ writing should be subject to further scholarly attention due to its multifaceted engagement with unresolved racial tensions. His unrefined outback tales certainly provide a ready source of material to support claims that his nostalgic visions of life in remote Australia were racist and paternalistic, but he also called for a greater understanding of Indigenous people, culture and history. He challenged readers to scrutinise their views concerning race. Readers were encouraged to allow Indigenous people to enter into the collective white consciousness and contribute to the national story.

The focus that Idriess placed on frontier conflict and Aboriginal disadvantage was significant in a period in which many were unwilling to engage with the Indigenous community. Healy argues that Aboriginal issues did not attract the interest of the heavily populated eastern half of Australia until the late 1950s (241). While the primary endeavour of Idriess’ writing was to enthrall readers with dramatic and exotic tales of outback life, his fiction and non-fiction were nuanced. His body of work refused to placate postcolonial anxieties or present a sanitised



vision of Australia's race relations. Idriess' depiction of the complexity and ambiguity that dominated matters of race made an important contribution to Australia's literary history by foregrounding issues that many preferred to remain hidden. This was important work: Deborah Bird Rose argues that if a nation forgets the things that make its citizens uneasy "we would find ourselves forgetting the losses for which we are ultimately accountable, and insulating ourselves against the absences that surround us ... We would have to forget who and where we really are" (47). Idriess addressed complex racial issues in an entertaining, accessible and non-threatening manner, and as a result readers embraced the storyteller's ambiguous images of race in large numbers.

### **A bush scribe**

A concise personal and literary biography provides a context for this examination of Idriess' engagement with race and nation. His colourful literary personae was based on his renown as a bushman, prospector, ANZAC and raconteur yet his private and public profile were markedly different. As a writer Idriess was larger than life but fellow writer Gilbert Anstruther described him as a "very quiet, unassuming man, slight in build and wiry-looking, with a tanned, weather-beaten skin and a stoop that comes of slouching at ease in a saddle. He has eyes that miss nothing, and a ready laugh" (71). Idriess' familiarity with remote Australian landscapes and communities was based on decades of travel throughout remote regions. Colin Roderick, the renowned writer, editor and academic, admired the manner in which Idriess made the whole continent his sourcebook (*Twenty Australian Novelists* 143). As a consequence Idriess was viewed as an authentic voice from the bush who brought urban readers into contact with far-flung and

unfamiliar regions. Anstruther claimed that while “Australians now know roughly what Australia is like—but only roughly. It still remains for men like Idriess ... [to] tell us exactly” (71). A similar observation was made by writer Olaf Ruhen who stated that Idriess was the writer who “above all others introduced Australians to the further bounds of their country ... for no one knew more of our furthest reaches” (30). The introduction Idriess offered was anything but dull. His idiosyncratic and conversational writing style proudly embraced colloquial language.

A short story manuscript provides one of a multitude of possible examples of Idriess’ love for the Australian idiom: “Barnsey struck west through Birdsville where the crows fly backwards to keep the dust out of their eyes” (“The Legionnaires”). Idriess concentrated his literary efforts on the non-urban scenes and ordinary people with whom he felt most comfortable. Despite settling into a semblance of domesticity in Sydney with a partner and two daughters the desire to roam and escape urban confines and pressures was ever present. When he was questioned by William Moore concerning his well-documented wanderlust, Idriess claimed that he continued to harbour the desire to travel and enjoy the camaraderie of outback folk:

I love the bush and only regret that I won’t have a few hundred years to roam again. I have found that the wilder the place the more friendly are the men. There is no hurry, no worry about paying rent or catching trams, and so you have time to know the other fellow. (“Four Books in a Year”)

His love for central and northern Australia landscapes, communities and histories was ingrained at an early age.

Idriess’ childhood was spent moving between a series of regional NSW towns including Lismore, Tenterfield and Broken Hill. In a 1974 interview with

Hazel de Berg he fondly recounted the school holidays he spent accompanying his father, a Sheriff's Officer and travelling mines inspector, on mine site inspection tours ("Interview by Hazel de Berg"). Father and son shared an interest in minerals and mining. Idriess' youth was spent wandering through mine sites, talking with prospectors and collecting mineral specimens. This interest resulted in his enrolment at the Broken Hill School of Mines but the young man soon embraced an itinerant lifestyle after the death of his mother ("Interview by Hazel de Berg").

Idriess moved to Sydney where he gained work as a lamp trimmer and bosun's mate on a boat running between Sydney and Newcastle but he claimed that "city life didn't agree with me. It was a type of imprisonment" ("Interview by Hazel de Berg"). He headed to less populated areas where he gained a succession of itinerant jobs that included drover, station-hand, horse-breaker, horse-tailer, rabbit-exterminator, boundary-rider, rouseabout, surveyor, buffalo hunter, wharfie, pearl diver and crocodile hunter (Ruhen 30; "Idriess, Ion" 362). The lure of making a fortune from prospecting ensured that he travelled frequently and widely through central and northern Australia, and even further afield to New Guinea. His passion was evident in a range of books. *Prospecting for Gold* (1931), *Gold Dust and Ashes* (1933), *Lightening Ridge* (1940), *Stone of Destiny* (1948), *Back o' Cairns* (1958) and *The Tin Scratchers* (1959) demonstrate Idriess' interest and expertise in mining a range of minerals and precious stones including gold, opal, tin and wolfram. He claimed that once he succumbed to "gold fever" he was never free from its influence ("Interview by Hazel de Berg"). He felt similarly about opal, reflecting in his 1938 *Man* article "The Land of Hope and Opal" that "the thrill of striking opal sets a man's mind and heart on fire" (73). The constant chase of rumours concerning newly discovered mineral deposits was interrupted by the

outbreak of war in 1914. After serving in the Fifth Light Horse at Gallipoli, Sinai and Palestine Idriess soon returned to his pre-war lifestyle.

His 1939 *Man* article “So You’re Looking for Gold” outlined the insatiable passion that drove many prospectors. Idriess claimed that those suffering from gold fever were

always seeking, always trying, always the happiest when he is poking away out into wild country ... While the gold lure calls he carries on regardless of hardship or risk ... he dislikes the civilisation that has inevitably followed him and he pushes on, ever further out. (78)

Despite Idriess’ perseverance his constant wanderings did not yield the great riches he hoped for. He claimed that “I was never one of the lucky ones with a rich claim. I never got a really very rich claim in anything but again and again I’ve been the claim next door to the richest opal claim” (“Interview by Hazel de Berg”). Idriess remained hopeful despite consistent disappointments. His 1944 letter to Bill Harney outlined a plan to inspect and purchase a number of small opal fields in a remote location. He asked Harney to inform him of any rumours he heard concerning new discoveries or fields, and requested that Harney not openly discuss the purpose of his planned outback journey (Letter to Bill Harney). The travels that Idriess undertook in search of mineral wealth allowed him to accumulate a vast array of experiences and stories which formed the basis of his writing career (Eley 244).

The time Idriess spent in central and northern regions informed a multitude of articles published in newspapers and periodicals including *Walkabout*, *Man*, *The Lone Hand*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Bulletin*. His favoured topics included outback histories, prospecting, travel, flora, fauna and Aboriginal

culture (“Interview by Hazel de Berg”). Given these interests it is unsurprising that Idriess was a regular contributor to *Walkabout* during the 1930s. One of the magazine’s 1935 “While the Billy Boils!” columns stated that Idriess needed “no introduction to the Australian reading public as a writer of graphic, forceful books and articles about the Australia beyond the cities which is featured in *Walkabout*” (42). *Man* (1936-1975) was another middlebrow periodical that was eager to promote its involvement with Idriess.

*Man* was a monthly men’s magazine that not only sought to entertain, in this case with short stories, poetry, sexually suggestive cartoons and articles covering a range of general topics, it also attempted to engage general readers in critical thought (Carter and Osborne 242). In 1938 the magazine proudly introduced Idriess as the editor of its “Australasiana” supplement and suggested that

no fitter person could have undertaken to edit the new Australasiana magazine: for Idriess has spent not years, but decades, in rambling through every corner of the continent ... He has, moreover, travelled with a seeing eye, lived heartily, mixed freely with every type of Australian. In a word, he knows his Australia; and he knows how to tell it. (“Ion L. Idriess” 6)

Idriess was not only proficient at writing vivid tales concerning outback life, he was adept in compiling them into numerous anthologies.

Many of Idriess’ books are collections of tales and histories that were amassed during outback travels. *One Wet Season* (1949) contains numerous stories he gathered during periods when work was interrupted by the wet season. These “fragments from men’s lives” (vii) provided an insight into the highs and lows of lifestyles that were unfamiliar to the majority of urban Australians. *The Nor’-*

*Westers* (1954) is a compilation of “random scraps from the great scrapbook of life” (v) that revealed a vast and varied nation. The numerous evenings Idriess spent avidly collecting the tales of bushmen around campfires are recounted in his prospecting memoir *Back o’ Cairns* (1958). *The Wild North* (1960) is yet another anthology of outback stories that were based on notes Idriess made “by aid of slush lamp in a lonely bush camp, or by moonlight on deck of a smellful lugger” (iv), or after a day wielding pick, axe, oar or tiller (iv). He took great care to present these collections as authentic insights into outback lifestyles and histories.

Idriess’ fiction and non-fiction usually contained an introduction that outlined the origins of his narratives. Typical sources included oral histories, diaries, memoirs and interviews. The foreword of *Man Tracks* (1935), a collection of stories concerning the Mounted Police in the far north of Western Australia, described his “qualifications” as his long familiarity with outback regions and an extended period spent in the company of Mounted Police. This experience enabled him to gain “a knowledge of the country, and an understanding of the mentality of the aborigines, that can be learned in no other way” (v). The foreword demonstrates the care Idriess took to cultivate his image as a bush writer. His success in this endeavour was acknowledged by writer A. C. Guerin who observed that the

best test of the particular niche he has carved for himself in Australian literature is the copies of his books that are to be seen in bark huts and the unrolled swags by the wayside. To be accepted in this company a man must ring true ... tenacity of purpose, and a close observance of little things have lifted him from the wallaby track to an unassailable position in Australian literature. (“A Pen Portrait”)

The publishing success achieved by an unsophisticated bush writer who was awarded an OBE in 1968 for his services to literature galled some writers (Rickard 131), and left others feeling irritated and envious (Cusack 237).

Idriess' first bestseller was his third book *Lasseter's Last Ride* (1931) ("Idriess, Ion" 362). The successful book established his reputation as a prominent outback writer. By 1980 its sales figures approached one-hundred and twenty thousand copies. In comparison by 1980 Herbert's acclaimed novel *Capricornia* had sold seventy-five thousand copies (Shoemaker 54). *Lasseter's Last Ride* recounts the doomed attempt of Harold Bell Lasseter to relocate a lucrative gold reef. Harold Lindsay, an author and conservationist, suggested that large numbers of 1930s readers who struggled through the Depression responded to Idriess' prospecting themed novels because they presented the seductive notion that it was possible to ease financial burdens by striking a rich claim ("Ion L. Idriess Strikes it Rich"). Idriess enjoyed success with other mining themed books. *Prospecting for Gold* is described by Robert Dixon as a popular manual for amateur miners. *Gold Dust and Ashes* was reprinted nineteen times over a ten year period ("Playing Tarzan" 135) and sold over forty thousand copies (Eley 151).

Idriess also enjoyed publishing success with two biographies of noted outback identities. *Flynn of the Inland* (1932) presents a colourful account of the efforts of Presbyterian minister John Flynn to reduce the hardships suffered by isolated populations. The book's two-thousand copy print run sold out in a matter of weeks and by June 1945 its sales totalled over fifty-six thousand copies (Eley 144). Idriess' biography of Sir Sidney Kidman, a leading figure in the pastoral industry, was published as *Cattle King* (1936). This vivid depiction of the cattleman's tenacity and success was also well received by readers and was

recently republished in 2013 by Angus and Robertson as part of their Australian Classics series. The longstanding support Idriess received from readers resulted in his books becoming ubiquitous items in many middle-class Australian households (Dixon, “Playing Tarzan” 135). Shoemaker claims that Idriess’ total sales were in excess of three million books (54) and describes the period between 1929 and 1945 as “the age of Idriess” (58). This staggering total and the writer’s enduring popularity ensured that by 1980 he remained Angus and Robertson’s most popular author (54).

It is unsurprising that Idriess’ phenomenal success led Angus and Robertson to extend him freedoms and privileges they did not afford to others. They were willing to accommodate Idriess at their Sydney office where he often spent the morning writing furiously and the afternoon drinking steadily in a nearby pub. In Idriess’ typical self-deprecating style he claimed that he swiftly completed manuscripts so he could get thoroughly drunk (“Interview by Hazel de Berg”). Ruhen described the close relationship between Idriess and his publisher as formidable (31). Angus and Robertson’s capacity to facilitate Idriess’ prolific output and successfully promote his writing was illustrated by the failure of Cornstalk to achieve any level of success with his first book *Madman’s Island* in 1927.

*Madman’s Island* was a fictionalised memoir concerning a period the writer spent marooned on a small island off the Queensland coast with one mentally unstable companion. Cornstalk insisted that Idriess should alter his account to include a female character as a romantic interest, which he did, but the book was a failure. Years later the resourceful Idriess revised the story, omitted the romance and submitted it to Angus and Robertson who successfully re-published it under



the same title in 1938. The achievements of the partnership were not only measurable in terms of sales figures or profit margins; Ruhen suggested the true significance of the joint venture was its cultivation of a popular new vogue in outback themed literature (31).

During a period in which readers' lives were dominated by the Depression and two world wars, Idriess and Angus and Robertson benefitted from a growing disenchantment with Britain (Haynes 144) and a demand for writing that depicted Australian scenes and ordinary people overcoming great hardship. Idriess' hyperbolic writing frequently depicted people prevailing against huge odds. *The Great Trek* (1940), a historical novel based on real events, was published as World War II raged. It recounted the successful attempt of a small party to cut a track through the western coastline of Cape York Peninsula in the 1860s. The group succeeded in their endeavours despite great adversity and privation. Their triumph was effected by the determination and perseverance of the group's two young leaders, brothers Frank and Alexander Jardine. The story provided a positive allegory for post-war reconstruction; just as the Jardines and their men prevailed through times of difficulty, so too might the nation recover from war. In the author's note Idriess outlined his hope that the Jardine brothers' daring, initiative and tenacity might inspire readers (vii). A 1940 *Cairns Post* review suggested that Idriess had every chance of achieving this aim because "the story has, of course, been told and retold, but never more vividly and picturesquely than by Ion Idriess" ("Story of the Jardines" 9). Idriess outlined a bright national future in several other books.

*The Great Boomerang* (1941) outlined the personal suffering that might be moderated and the developments that could be undertaken if rivers which flowed

unimpeded into the sea were re-routed inland (217). A similar treatise on northern Australia's vast reserves of unrealised potential was the focus of Idriess' last published book *Challenge of the North* (1969). Some of the suggestions for future schemes contained in this book were as extreme as those outlined in *The Great Boomerang*. For example *Challenge of the North* claimed that successful undersea resorts could be built alongside the Great Barrier Reef (26). Idriess' dramatic arguments and melodramatic writing style were unrelentingly positive in terms of the nation's future but they exposed his writing to negative criticism.

Vance and Nettie Palmer were critical of Idriess' writing (Nile, "Literary Democracy and the Politics of Reputation" 140). Many other critics, including those writing for *Walkabout*, held similar views. A 1935 *Walkabout* review of *Man Tracks* described Idriess' depiction of the exploits of West Australia's Mounted Police as vivid and amazing ("Bagot Grey" 59). The reviewer claimed that the book would not appeal to discerning readers because its ideal reader was the sedentary urban inhabitant who had witnessed nothing more exciting than a bolting tram (59). *The Nor'-Westers* was dismissed by a 1955 *Walkabout* review as uncomplicated, episodic, rambling and "good average quality round-the-campfire stuff" ("More Idriess" 42). In a similar manner a 1958 *Walkabout* review of *Coral Sea Calling* (1957), a collection of tales concerning northern Australia, described the narrative as a boy's own adventure story. The reviewer suggested that Idriess' books were always "a little larger than life, as the histories record it. We must give Mr Idriess credit for a good deal of research and forgive him a good deal of padding; for it is the vivid sort of stuff that boys still enjoy" ("Scrutarius" 39). Idriess responded to criticism in a 1960 letter to a reviewer known as Jayem:

Reviewers tell me I can't write of course but I am used to and don't mind a kick in the pants. However, having settled that I can't write they carry on and write an intriguing review, apparently I've "got something," what it is they don't know. (Letter to Jayem)

Although Idriess' writing was popular with readers, his writing was seldom taken seriously by reviewers, critics and the academy.

### **Outlaws and heroes**

Shoemaker asserts that the academy's focus on literary and acclaimed writing has resulted in a shadow of critical neglect falling across popular literature (58). In support of this claim he highlights Healy's failure to acknowledge Idriess' numerous and widely read engagements with Australian race relations in *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia* (54). Idriess' writing should be subject to further examination because "it would be both irresponsible and misleading not to discuss his work in relation to the literary perception of Australian Aborigines in White writing" (7). Shoemaker considers Idriess to be an influential writer because his large sales figures ensured that his published work had the ability to affect deleteriously the perceptions of Aborigines held by a wide range of readers. He argues that Idriess encouraged readers to adopt an inherently regressive view of Indigenous Australians (54). The historical novel *Outlaws of the Leopolds* (1952) is classified as a clear demonstration that Idriess' writing revealed him to be "a white supremacist" (139) and "racially prejudiced White Australian writer" (142).

*Outlaws of the Leopolds* is a fictional representation of an infamous nineteenth-century Mounted Police expedition in the King Leopold Ranges, a remote region of the Kimberley, that was undertaken by Constable Bill Richardson

and two Aboriginal police trackers known as Captain and Pigeon/Sandamara/Jandamarra (referred to here as Sandamara). In 1894 the party set out to capture a number of Aborigines who had broken various white laws. During the trek Sandamara and Captain killed Richardson, set their Aboriginal captives free and joined a group of Aboriginal outlaws. The group launched a number of attacks on a sparse, isolated and vulnerable white population. These actions ensured that the capture of the outlawed band became the primary focus of the region's Mounted Police.

Captain and Sandamara would have been well aware of the magnitude of their decision to murder a policeman and attack white members of the community. The seriousness of their actions was highlighted by the elevated status that police trackers often held. Many within the white community admired Aboriginal trackers for their bush skills, endurance and resilience. This image was shared by sections of the Indigenous community according to Idriess' 1935 *Walkabout* article "Darwin, North Australia" which claimed trackers were treated like aristocrats by their communities (37). An Aboriginal character in *Outlaws of the Leopolds* adopted this view. Ellemara, a captive of Sandamara and Captain, informed the trackers that the Mounted Police stood little chance of capturing Indigenous outlaws without the assistance of the best Aboriginal trackers: his "expressive face was all one good-humoured grin, his kindly eyes telling the trackers he was proud of their prowess" (27). The impetus behind Sandamara and Captain's actual renouncement of their esteemed positions in the police force is not known, however, it is evident that they embraced their decision with a sense of fortitude because the police took three years to capture or kill the determined group's leaders.

The memorable episode of frontier conflict also formed the basis of Colin Johnson's novel *Long Live Sandawara* (1979). Stephen Muecke, Alan Rumsey and Banjo Wirrunmarra suggest in "Pigeon the Outlaw: History as Texts" (1985) that this instance of inter-racial conflict facilitates examinations of the constructed and contested nature of white history, largely because Sandamara's position shifts between tragic figure and revolutionary hero (81). Idriess' version of the story is condemned by Shoemaker for its ready adoption of racial stereotypes that depicted Aborigines as bestial, devious, treacherous and "somehow less than human" (139). *Outlaws of the Leopolds* certainly contains numerous episodes where Indigenous people are described as bestial (7; 37) and animalistic (10; 39). Idriess described an Aboriginal celebration as a "Stone Age bacchanalia":

There were fiendish yells as fights broke out and warriors leaped in berserk fury chewing their beards, spears flew, men women and children ran screaming to snatch weapons and take sides, or fall upon one another, clawing, biting and kicking in maniacal lust to main and kill. (66)

To further his argument Shoemaker points out that *Outlaws of the Leopolds* was not an isolated example of Idriess' willingness to embrace paternalistic ideology. Special mention is made of insensitive representations of race in *Nemarluk* (1941), a fictionalised account of the exploits of a well-known Aboriginal resistance fighter of the same name. Shoemaker decries the manner in which Idriess reduced Aboriginal characters "to a brutal, bestial level ... the undertone of white supremacy is ever-present and surfaces in the most unlikely places" (56). According to Shoemaker, Idriess' writing fully reflected "the condescension and disdain which many Australians of the 1929-45 period felt for Aborigines" (56).

These conclusions apply modern sensibilities to mid-twentieth-century literature and fail to identify a level of complexity within Idriess' writing.

Shoemaker presents a one-dimensional critique of Idriess' writing by focusing on his descriptions of Aborigines as violent and irrational, however, these representations in *Outlaws of the Leopolds* are countered by the novel's attempts to provide readers with alternate views of race and frontier violence that were capable of unsettling supremacist notions. The Author's Note described the attempts of a group of Aboriginal men, branded as outlaws by white society, as a "feasible scheme to drive the white people from his country" (v). He viewed the plan as a reasonable response to the cultural dislocation caused by white settlement. When questioned by de Berg concerning *Outlaws of the Leopolds*, Idriess expressed his empathy and admiration for Aborigines who justifiably designated whites as their enemy and who fought for the right to live autonomously in their own country ("Interview by Hazel de Berg"). The novel reveals that while white society considered these men to be barbarous murderers, many in the Indigenous population labelled them as freedom fighters who rejected white social mores and laws, demanded justice for their suffering and the restoration of their autonomy.

*Outlaws of the Leopolds* is criticised by Shoemaker for depicting an unequal contest between black and white (139), however, the novel described the Aboriginal outlaws as freedom fighters who were justified in their instigation of a campaign of terror against an invader who threatened their culture, food sources and autonomy. Ellemara, a notorious outlaw, points out the injustice suffered by Aboriginal groups who supported the endeavours of white settlers

'They work like women to help the white men take their country. The white man takes the big waterholes with the sweet grassy flats, that's the first

thing. He chops down our sacred trees to build his house on our own corroboree grounds...He kills or drives away the food that has fed our people since the Dream Time, just because he wants all the water and grass for his cattle and horses and sheep. Then, when he grows strong, he drives us away, he only wants to keep around his station enough young men to help him with his cattle.’ (26)

In Idriess’ novel the outlawed Aborigines who were aided by their cache of stolen guns and intimate knowledge of the local environment and police tactics, posed a genuine threat to vulnerable white settlements. As Ellemara attempted to convince Richardson’s two trackers to renounce their allegiance to the Mounted Police, he praised the example set by other Aborigines who had attacked settlers or their property and were subsequently viewed as heroes:

for there were lots of more ‘good men’ defying police and whites.  
 ‘Langooradale for instance,’ said Ellemara; ‘he was a police tracker too, and Long Frankey, and Big Paddy...And Ellemara drawled on with names of native killers and heroes who were ‘sung’ in seasonal corroboree and nightly around the campfires throughout the Leopolds. (28)

The realignment of outlawed Aborigines on the side of justice facilitated an examination of settler history that didn’t automatically adopt a white point of view. *Outlaws of the Leopolds* unsettled the very racial stereotypes it adopted and challenged the notion that the actions of white society were irreproachable. Rather than simply reinforce dominant notions of race, Idriess highlighted some uncomfortable aspects of settlement history. Healy asserted that if “literature is one of the dominant modes by which a culture becomes conscious then it is only by studying that consciousness in that form that one can discover its shape” (143). If

this is true, Idriess' writing revealed the period's increasing disquiet concerning the dispossession and disenfranchisement of Aboriginal groups.

Idriess' novel simultaneously presented a positive and negative portrayal of both the Mounted Police and renegade Aborigines bent on terrorising local white settlers. The novel reflected the contradictory nature of mid-twentieth-century race relations by reinforcing and subverting dominant racial types and accepted settler history. As a result it not only provided an entertaining historical narrative, it could facilitate the reassessment of dominant notions of race. The ambiguous nature of Idriess' novel demonstrates Jennifer Strauss' identification of a marked inconsistency in the "voices that were beginning to challenge simplistic divisions between black primitivism and white progress" (120). Some of Idriess' readers may have viewed the *Outlaws of the Leopolds* as an unequivocal proponent of White Australia, but others may have been inspired to question the notion that European settlement had been an unrivalled success and that Aborigines were primitive brutes. The Author's Note described the book as an attempt to humanise Aboriginal people and to "write and speak his thoughts and feelings just as we, and he, would do" (v). Modern critics can easily label Idriess as paternalistic and insensitive, yet it is evident that his writing contained genuine attempts to provoke and challenge accepted notions of race.

*Outlaws of the Leopolds* is disparaged by Shoemaker for "lauding, above all, the valour of the Kimberley law enforcers" (138). Idriess undoubtedly admired the skills and achievements of the Mounted Police. He vividly recounted the exploits of its resilient members in *Man Tracks*, *Over the Range* (1937) and a 1939 *Man* article "The Land of the Long Patrols." Despite readily adopting negative racist stereotypes in *Outlaws of the Leopolds*, Idriess also ascribed his Aboriginal outlaws



a similar level of tenacity and courage as that displayed by the police. These Indigenous protagonists were not simplistic caricatures of a sub-human race or foils to offset the heroics of white characters. This is evident in Idriess' account of Richardson's murder which is not presented in a one-dimensional fashion. Idriess depicts the constable's death as the result of simmering tensions that were perpetuated by the attempts of the police to force an increasingly marginalised Aboriginal population to adhere to white law. Sandamara and Captain killed Richardson after they were repeatedly challenged by their captive Ellemara, who demanded the trackers reconsider their acceptance of subservient positions in white society on the basis that their roles supported processes intent on systematically dispossessing their own people (27).

*Outlaws of the Leopolds* highlighted the varied reactions of Aborigines to white settlement. Ellemara praised the efforts of those who attacked settlers and their livestock while disparaging "dingo-livered curs for working for the white man" (26). This opinion is supported by Stuart Macintyre who argues that some actively resisted white settlement while others adapted to greatly changed and often traumatic circumstances by adopting supportive and inferior roles in rural and remote communities (61). Ellemara was unequivocally part of the former group, convinced that it was not possible for the two races to peacefully coexist. His surety of purpose eventually persuaded Sandamara and Captain to renounce their loyalty to Richardson and the police force, and join Ellemara's resistance group (37). While the local white population and the police considered Sandamara and Captain to be murderous criminals, many Aboriginal characters viewed them as resistance fighters. Idriess' engagement with contentious and unresolved racial issues was significant in a period dominated by white hegemony.

*Outlaws of the Leopolds* challenged readers' views concerning frontier conflict by comparing the classification of Aborigines as criminals for refusing to acquiesce to white law, with an alternate proposal that labelled these outlaws as heroes of a protest movement whose great "deeds are sung in 'corroboree'"(28). The depiction of Aborigines refusing to accept passively the dictates of white law and their people's subjugation, subverted the period's unquestioned veneration of the settler experience. It also addressed the exclusion of Indigenous voices from the nation's historiography (Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told* 94) by suggesting that Aboriginal counter-narratives were worthy of being told. The novel may have been weighted in the favour of the police who ultimately prevailed against outbreaks of Aboriginal resistance, however, it made a contribution to a body of writing that Bill Ashcroft believes resisted dominant discourse (*Post-Colonial Transformation* 13). *Outlaws of the Leopolds* provided a thrilling narrative that invited readers to consider accepted racial conventions and white versions of frontier history.

In *Outlaws of the Leopolds* some Aboriginal characters are afforded the ability to act independently and drive events in an environment where police were largely reliant on the assistance of Aborigines. Ellemara claimed that "without trackers to help [police] chase us away and track us down the white men would soon lose all their cattle—and their lives too!" (27) . The novel supported Macintyre's claim that settlers in northern regions were reliant on Aborigines (105). The dependence of whites in the Kimberley was accentuated later in the novel when the capture and death of the resistance group's leaders is directly attributed to the actions of other Aborigines rather than the police. In Idriess' account Ellemara's downfall was orchestrated by an Aboriginal man called Danmara, who sought vengeance on the gang's leader for stealing his woman (182). Ellemara's

behaviour had not been sanctioned by Aboriginal law, therefore, Danmara became one of an increasing number of Aborigines who disapproved of Ellemara's rapidly expanding ego and growing disrespect for established customs (39). Danmara, who had "never ceased planning and working night and day for the downfall of Ellemara" (182), successfully used the police as pawns to exact his revenge by providing them with the information they required to capture and eventually hang the outlaw (183).

In a similar fashion Idriess attributed Sandamara's demise to the intervention of another Aborigine. In this case a man named Marawon sought reprisal after Sandamara stole his woman. Idriess depicted Sandamara as more fearful of dying as a result of Marawon's vendetta than being killed by the police: "with a new caution much more nerve-racking than caution against patrols, Pigeon made his way back to a hideout, greatly disturbed. He was hunted now not only by the patrols but by something even more implacable—native vendetta" (188). While Marawon did not murder Sandamara directly, he effected the outlaw's death by providing the hunted man's location to the police force who had spent three years searching for him (225). The novel may be viewed as an attempt to perpetuate the image of a primitive people with a predisposition for violence, but this subversion of traditional power relationships encouraged readers to reconsider their views concerning settler history. Idriess did not present whites as unquestioned conquerors of remote Australia, instead he outlined a constant level of simmering tensions between black and white. Isolated settlers in the novel lived with the constant threat of attack from members of Aboriginal groups who provided much needed labour and local knowledge. This sense of shifting power relationships was at odds with dominant racial views that rendered Aborigines as a passive people.

Shoemaker's suggestion that *Outlaws of the Leopolds* failed to repudiate dominant racial ideology ignores Idriess' attempts, admittedly unskilled, to present conflicting views on race and frontier conflict. His depiction of a long but successful police reprisal mission was offset by a refusal to glorify in the subjugation of Aboriginal people. At the novel's dramatic climax Sandamara was mortally wounded and surrounded by police and their Aboriginal trackers, yet Idriess did not represent him as defeated. Instead, Sandamara's melodramatic last words demonstrated his continued rejection of white society and its laws:

As the trackers came running up he struggled to rise to a near sitting position. In bitter gasps he cursed the trackers. Then he gasped: 'Give—me—cartridges! And I'll—fight—you—you ...!' Slowly the life light faded from Pigeon's eyes. (239).

*Outlaws of the Leopolds* is not a wholly paternalistic and unthoughtful glorification of settler history. The novel contained traditional racial types but it also attempted to reflect on the experiences of Aboriginal people who resisted their subjugation. It acknowledged silenced Aboriginal voices and validated their protest stories.

Henry Reynolds is critical of suggestions that Aborigines were unwarlike people who offered little resistance to European settlement (*The Other Side of the Frontier* 198). *Outlaws of the Leopolds* was one of several instances where Idriess' engagement with frontier history depicted formidable and intelligent Aborigines who refused to submit to white authority (see *Nemarluk* and *Man Tracks*). His 1935 *Walkabout* article "Arnhem Land" depicted the refusal of Aborigines to comply with the demands of white law and the effectiveness of many fierce pockets of Aboriginal resistance in northern Australia. Idriess claimed that "most of the victories" in episodes of frontier conflict in this remote region had been

achieved by Aborigines whose bush and detective skills were far superior to the best bushmen in the police force (33). Idriess did not present all Aborigines as complicit in their disenfranchisement or willing to be controlled and contained by white authorities.

“The Land of the Long Patrols” also subverted the image of Aboriginal passivity and lack of intelligence by outlining the defiance of Aborigines who successfully thwarted and obstructed white law enforcement measures (74). The article concluded that “the wild aboriginal in his natural environment is by no means a fool” (75). *Man Tracks* provides yet more accounts of incidents where Aborigines attacked settlers or their cattle (60; 90). In the foreword Idriess outlined the importance of documenting black and white stories of peace and conflict as this was a true reflection of his outback experiences (v). Although he adopted animalistic imagery in his descriptions of the ferocity of Aboriginal men who attacked a Mounted Police party who were attempting to capture an Aboriginal man called Moodoorish (93), Idriess portrayed Aborigines in the remote north as a serious threat to the safety of settler populations and the enforcement of white law. His writing reflected the ability of Aborigines to react against processes that attempted to force them to live in a subsistent manner on the margins of mainstream society or, as Healy claims, “an abnormal world of fragmented order and limited expectation” (293).

Idriess’ melodramatic writing style and his paternalistic language should not overshadow his empathy and admiration for Aborigines who resisted white authority. Conflict between the police and Aborigines was not depicted as a simplistic battle between the righteous and the criminal or the hero and the outlaw. In *Outlaws of the Leopolds* Idriess revealed his awareness of the moral difficulties

faced by the police as he did not depict them as conquering victors on the side of justice. Instead, Idriess acknowledged that the police occupied an often untenable position because their role required them to enforce white law and exact retribution against Aborigines who refused to acquiesce to the loss of their autonomy. *Over the Range*, a memoir that focused on a period in which Idriess accompanied a Mounted Police Patrol through the Kimberley, presents a similar image.

*Over the Range* did not depict Constable Laurie O'Neill and two Aboriginal police trackers, Larry and Davey, as unflinching agents of white society. Rather than enforce white law unflinchingly, Idriess stated that the Mounted Police attempted to "interfere as little as possible with the customs of the semi-wild and wild tribes, believing it the better policy to allow them to settle their own disputes" (7). Cultural sensitivity was also exhibited via Idriess' portrayal of O'Neill as conflicted by some of the demands of his role. For example O'Neill detested being forced to detain Aboriginal people suffering from leprosy and transport them to locations that offered treatment because, as a pastoralist informed Idriess, Aboriginal people "are convinced that if you take them to Derby they will die there, and they would rather die out in the hills" (210). Rather than represent the stupidity of a primitive people whose actions facilitated the spread of leprosy, Idriess provided an Aboriginal perspective of contagion and disease that explained and rationalised their behaviour (234).

*Over the Range* made an effort to counter misunderstanding and prejudice concerning the plight of remote Aborigines and to stimulate an empathetic response from the reader. Janice Radway's examination of the American Book-of-the-Month-Club identifies middlebrow readers as "oriented always to the gaze and assessment of others" (283). She argues that middlebrow readers whose lives were

far removed from the lifestyles or historical events they read about could become immersed in a narrative, identify with characters and make a considered response. Reading could be a transformative experience as it provided the opportunity to experience “something with greater force and fervor than one might be permitted in ordinary life” (284). Idriess’ writing presents numerous, and often clumsy, attempts to inform readers about the plight of Aborigines in a manner that might inspire their empathy and influence their views concerning race.

In *Men of the Jungle* (1932), a memoir concerning Idriess’ wanderings through northern Australia, he suggested that a reduction in the level of ignorance concerning Indigenous culture might inspire a greater level of tolerance and understanding. Contact with a group of determined and proud Aboriginal men on this journey led Idriess to conclude that it was “impossible for any who understand to be contemptuous of these men” (42). This view was supported in *Over the Range* where Idriess rejected the notion that Aborigines were the descendants of brute apes, suggesting instead that some Aborigines had “savagely intellectual faces, keen and alert” (292). Idriess hoped he might influence readers to reconsider what they knew about Aboriginal people and “do something towards curing his ills and allowing him to retain his liberty” (v). *Over the Range* did not simplistically reflect complex race relations in mid-twentieth-century society: it encouraged readers to make a considered response and modify their views and behaviour. This suggested that Idriess was aware that, in the words of Lisa Slater, “language is not so much a vehicle of communication, as of power. It is a means to make people act” (362).

Idriess’ attempts to foreground racial discrimination and to foster the readers’ empathy supports Radway’s claim that tensions were created by the

attempts of middlebrow writing to reconnect readers to things they had become separated from (285). Idriess' engagement with race was capable of heightening the racial anxieties of readers who took comfort in the notion of a racial hierarchy. *Over the Range* challenged the reader to reconsider the racial divide by presenting O'Neill's bold assertion that black and white races were more closely linked than many believed. He claimed that contact with Aborigines led to the realisation that a

few of these people's beliefs are our own old stories ... I've got a shock sometimes. Have been quite alone but for the trackers in a wild nigger camp when some incident has occurred that proved these people knew or believed something I thought was a cherished idea of our own civilization. It is only sort of vague link here and there of course: still, it gives man something to think about. (159)

The suggestion that the distance between primitive and civilised man was not as wide as many assumed is noted by Dixon, who argues that Idriess' writing revealed an uncertainty and ambivalence in the space that separated white and black ("Playing Tarzan" 137).

Some of the tension that existed in this contested space was caused by the removal of Aboriginal children. Idriess addresses this issue in *One Wet Season*. Several chapters concern Womba Billy, a white man who had been raised by Aborigines and was able to live in both black and white cultures. Idriess recounted the efforts of Womba and his Aboriginal partner to prevent their much loved daughter from coming to the attention of white authorities and being removed from their care (39; 41). The couple's worst fears were realised when government representatives detained the girl. The parents' grief was described in a melodramatic and emotive fashion that accentuated their deep sense of loss and



Idriess' dislike of child removal practices. He concluded that "the taking of a half-caste child from its mother's arms has always seemed to me a cruel law" (39). The inhumanity of white bureaucracy was heightened by the parents' failed attempts to temper their situation. Idriess claimed that appeals to government departments and local Derby police to locate the child close to her parents failed due to the heartless rationale that it was best to situate a mixed-race Aboriginal child beyond the contaminating influence of their parents (46).

Idriess' poignant tale of child removal questioned whether a society that considered itself to be highly civilised should sanction such barbarous acts against a racial minority. It is acknowledged that Idriess' portrayals of Aboriginal suffering were complicated by his adoption of racist language and stereotypes. This complexity reflected William Stanner's claim that Aboriginal people were alternatively deprecated and sentimentalised (44). I do not suggest that Idriess' sympathetic representations of Aboriginal people should negate those which are racist. Nicholas Thomas claims that a nuanced analysis of colonial relationships does not necessarily rehabilitate exploitative, racist, violent or unjust acts or policies. Instead, it seeks a deeper understanding of elements of positive imaginings of colonialism (17). Idriess' writing should not be excused for reflecting dominant mid-twentieth century racial ideology, but neither should it be subject to criticism based upon modern sensibilities and mores.

Shoemaker criticises Idriess for adopting paternalistic and supremacist language, but this is a one-dimensional view taken from a modern standpoint. Much of Idriess' racially ambiguous oeuvre contained writing that was and remains insensitive, but it also included episodes that challenged dominant racial ideology and historiography. He frequently appealed to readers to examine their

preconceived notions concerning white superiority. Strauss argues that the tendency for literature to be subject to a marked inconsistency enabled it to place a focus on ideological complexities (121). This view is supported by Thomas' identification of a fluidity and ambivalence in colonial ideologies (17). An element of racial volatility is evident in many mid-twentieth-century novels that engaged with race.

Shoemaker classifies *Coonardoo* as ahead of its time and *Capricornia* as honest and incisive (40), yet these books also contain paternalistic and racist language, imagery and negative racial stereotypes. Adrian Caesar suggests that *Capricornia* did not present a model for a new engagement with race because it was heavily reflective of the period:

Much has been made of Herbert's outrage at white treatment of Aborigines, and his apparent sympathy for the half-caste ... But the tonal uncertainty of the narrative renders these issues complex; the tragic is often dealt with in a comic tone. It is true that passages of loud indignation against racism are put into the mouths of some characters, and the narrator also levels irony in the same direction. Yet in the first few pages a metaphor suggests that the conquest of the Aborigines by whites was part of a "natural" process, and elsewhere the narrator seems to be condescending towards Aborigines. (160)

Many narratives that engaged with race during this period were heavily influenced by the ambivalent racial ideology that was manifest in Australian society. Idriess' writing was marked by contradiction, yet a broad section of his oeuvre sought to educate readers concerning Indigenous culture, promote social change that might relieve Aboriginal disadvantage and contribute to a broad dialogue concerning race. His focus on Indigenous people and culture was part of a consistent attempt to

foreground Aboriginal people in the consciousness of urban readers. This was a significant undertaking in period that was reluctant to afford non-white voices an official place in the national story.

The effective exclusion of Aborigines from the notice of southern populations is revealed in Reynolds' reflective text *Why Weren't We Told* (2000). The account of his relocation from Tasmania to Townsville in 1965, and his subsequent interaction with Aboriginal people, led to the acknowledgement that there were aspects of Australian society "that I knew nothing about, things I had not even suspected. It was as though I had come to a country that was both familiar and foreign at one and the same time" (3). The academic had considered himself to be well read so he was shocked to realise that Aboriginal people had virtually been written out of Australian history between 1900 and 1960 (94). He was confronted with the national silence and cult of forgetfulness identified by Stanner's 1969 Boyer Lectures, which critiqued Aboriginal disadvantage and the manner in which they were prevented from contributing to Australian society.

The ingrained nature of Aboriginal disadvantage became apparent to Stanner when he travelled through northern Australia in 1952: "When I returned to the Northern Territory after a long absence, I could start to work very much where I had left off without any acute sense of change in the aboriginal life around me or their relations with white Australia" (21). The experience led to his declaration that as a nation "we have been able for so long to disremember the aborigines that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so" (25). The reluctance of White Australia to transform race relations was bolstered by the safe physical distance that separated many Aborigines from the majority of mid-twentieth-century Australians living around large coastal cities. Idriess' fiction and

non-fiction contributed to a diverse body of writing that brought contentious matters of race into the sphere of general urban readers. As the period progressed he made numerous and overt attempts to educate readers concerning Aboriginal history, society and culture, and to prompt them to re-assess dominant notions of race.

### **An educational crusade**

Idriess shared *Walkabout*'s desire to take the reader on a journey through landscapes, scenes and communities that continued to occupy a significant place in the national psyche. This ensured that his writing provided readers with an opportunity to experience vicariously the lifestyles and environments many would not experience firsthand. His 1938 *Walkabout* article "Romance of the Coral Seas" tempted the reader to travel north to a region of untold beauty: "What delight for the tourists of the world, out here in this blue sea with its palm-clad islands, its historic romance, its mighty fish!" (20). The author's note prefacing *The Nor'-Westers* invited readers to "ramble along with me across this fascinating continent of ours" (v). In a similar manner *Men of the Jungle* offered the "chaps down south" (196) a vivid narrative set in a remote location. The literary exposure to unknown people and scenes might entertain readers, but it was apparent that Idriess hoped that it would also leave them better informed.

Didactic intentions were evident in an episode of *One Wet Season* where Idriess lauded the example set by of a young southern woman who undertook an extended holiday in the Kimberley in order to gain a better understanding of remote Australia. As the adventurous woman grew familiar with the region she became "more and more interested in the people and in the life, so different from

civilization a thousand miles down south” (5). Outback travel is depicted as an enlightening experience that Australians should undertake even if they considered themselves to be well-travelled. Idriess’ memoir *Across the Nullarbor* (1951) suggested that travel seldom failed to reveal fresh aspects of a vast and varied nation to the new and seasoned traveller alike. Prior to a car journey from Sydney to Perth and return, Idriess admitted that he had discounted his travelling companion’s assertion that he would see much to broaden his outlook (3). Idriess already considered himself to be an expert traveller who had seen so much of the nation that there were few remaining surprises, yet during the journey he admitted he had been wrong as the expedition revealed “how little I know Australia” (117). If a traveller of such repute as Idriess had much to gain from new travel experiences so too did urban populations whom Idriess claimed knew very little of the nation they occupied (4; 7; 15). The writer challenged his readers to journey far and wide and to consider whether their vision of the nation reflected reality.

Stephen Alomes suggests that literature which focused on the outback increased the reader’s awareness of remote landscapes and communities. This achievement was viewed as significant in a period that was insular, conservative and racially biased (96). During the mid-twentieth century many Australians believed Aboriginal people were primitives who belonged to an inferior race that occupied the position of least importance in a racial hierarchy. Few refuted the notion that Western Europeans sat at the pinnacle. Idriess not only revealed the nation to readers; his writing also exposed the insurmountable barriers of prejudice faced by Aborigines. Those who had little experience of cross-cultural contact were encouraged to re-negotiate accepted truths based on notions of white supremacy.

The superiority of Australia's white population was unsettled by Idriess' 1935 *Walkabout* article "Where the Wild Men Roam." The reader might assume that the title referred to Aborigines living nomadic lifestyles in remote regions, however, the "wild men" were revealed to be white men who had rejected western society. Their preference for isolated locations and their adoption of many aspects of Indigenous lifestyles questioned the ability of Australia's white society to satisfy the needs of all its inhabitants. The white dingo hunter who had "gone primitive" won Idriess' respect due to his advanced level of bush skills, resilience and ingenuity, all of which were required to survive in a harsh environment and live harmoniously nearby Aboriginal communities (18). The article highlighted the manner in which the application of the term "primitive" was semantically slippery. It demonstrated Graham Huggan's argument that race and racism "are ideological constructs whose meanings are continually contested" (14). "Where the Wild Men Roam" challenged the reader to view racial boundaries as fluid and shifting, and in so doing Idriess unsettled the infallible image of White Australia.

*Men of the Jungle* also outlined Idriess' familiarity with the experiences of "wild men" living in isolated locations. When he and some companions were left with dwindling food supplies on a long journey through remote country they were forced to live off the land. Idriess admitted that during this time of hardship they

grew very close to the heart of the Wild. On hushed days and nights I could almost sense the great heart beating. Some few men merge right into the heart itself. They are perhaps "queer" and are very few and far between. I have met one or two in the Far North, men who have slipped right back until they have become literally Children of Nature. (10)

Was it a primitive or animalistic act to reject all that western society had to offer and seek a closer connection the environment during a period in which most Australians were negatively affected by war and economic hardship? Shoemaker argues that the turbulent times provided an impetus for social questioning, and many of the questions concerned race (8). Idriess explored whether the classification of “primitive” was a just reflection of a way of life that offered people—white or black—independence and a strong connection to the environment. He did not propose that more sections of the white community should adopt an Indigenous way of life, but his writing did suggest that two vastly disparate lifestyles should not be compared in a manner which dictated that one must be viewed as superior to the other. Difference could be valued rather than viewed as a threat to the power base of the dominant society.

Idriess also examined cultural difference and notions of racial inferiority in his 1936 *Walkabout* article “Lazy Days in Crocodile Land.” As he accompanied a white crocodile hunter and his Aboriginal crew on a trip around northern coastlines, Idriess observed two contrasting cultures. The boat’s captain invested all of his time, energy and finances into the boat. While he constantly worried about his business and seldom relaxed, his crew spent their down-time happily resting, eating or sleeping. Their frame of mind was happy and content. The captain mused in a light-hearted fashion that if the boat sunk his crew would not worry, they could simply swim to land and move on. In contrast the captain claimed that he could not swim a stroke, and, if his ship sunk “he may as well go down with it, for it represents every ‘bob’ he owns in the world” (11). The captain inverted the traditional power balance between employer and employee, white and black. He refused to classify his workers as slaves because he recognised that he was the one

who worked without respite and was heavily burdened. “Lazy Days in Crocodile Land” questioned whether the quality of life enjoyed by the Aboriginal workers was superior to that adopted by the majority of the population who strived to earn an income so they might pay for housing, goods and services (11). The article encouraged readers to set aside preconceived notions of racial superiority. Idriess’ attempt to engage readers in a dialogue concerning race supports David Carter’s claim that middlebrow writing contributed to complex literary dialogue (“Modernity” 138).

Idriess admired several aspects of the lifestyles of Aborigines. Of particular interest was their strong connection to country and their ability to manage the environment. Several of Idriess’ *Walkabout* articles depicted Aborigines, rightly or wrongly, as vastly superior custodians of the land. They support Bill Gammage’s findings that Indigenous populations actively managed and altered the land until the advent of white settlements (2). In “The Kimberleys” Idriess claimed that despite the vast development potential of northern Australia the white population failed to conquer, control and prosper in regions that had long been occupied by Aborigines (32). The failure of white populations in remote locations was revealed in subsequent *Walkabout* articles to be the result of poor custodianship. His 1935 *Walkabout* article “West of the Darling” recounted a journey he took between southern Queensland and the South Australian border which highlighted alarming levels of soil erosion and land degradation, plus the widespread destruction of native animal habitats due to the introduction of feral animal species.

The environmental degradation caused by white settlement horrified Idriess. In “West of the Darling” he attributed it to farming practices that were not well suited to Australian settings (42). Macintyre supports this view in his claim that



imbalance and exhaustion were caused by the demands of white settlement on the environment, and the introduction of animal species and agricultural practices that were often determined by international influences including the flow of credit, supplies and markets (130). Idriess expressed concern that travel was “an object-lesson, which teaches much and leaves room for troubled thought. For, apparently, the country is slipping backward; it is not the same land that the pioneers knew” (42).

Another vision of the poor custodianship of white settlement was provided in Idriess’ 1935 *Walkabout* article “Sand.” This descriptive account of desolate central Australian landscapes issued a warning that current farming practices which altered or damaged river systems, and increased the rate of encroaching desert boundaries, posed a very real threat to pastoralists: “Perhaps it is hard to understand from our homes in the cities, or from our sheltered farm or station on the coastal lands. But ‘out there’ you can see once solid hills now sticking up like the decayed teeth of old men” (24). The continued adoption of destructive agriculture and forestry practices was identified as a perilous undertaking that was capable of upsetting the balance of nature that Aborigines had previously managed successfully. Idriess dramatically stated that “I would hate to be an alarmist but then I have the eyes to see things ... it is time indeed for a voice to cry in the wilderness” (23). His identification of the deterioration of the environment in regions settled by white communities inferred that Indigenous populations were thoughtful and successful custodians of the landscape.

Idriess identified a misplaced sense of white superiority in land management practices and implied that much could be learnt from Aboriginal society regarding good custodianship. This remains a contentious issue (Gammage

2) but Idriess repeatedly inferred that Australian society would benefit from a greater understanding of Indigenous culture and practices. He did not handle the topic with the finesse of literary writers such as Patrick White, whose *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) is applauded by Goldsworthy for the manner in which it suggested that white Australia should increasingly look to Aboriginal values and skills (124). While Idriess' writing was unrefined and often indelicate in its handling of matters of race, it consistently foregrounded Aboriginal stories and culture.

In the mid-twentieth century Aborigines played a minor role in the national story, yet Idriess asserted that they should occupy an integral place in the nation's history ("Interview by Hazel de Berg"). A reduction in the urban population's ignorance concerning Indigenous culture and society was viewed by Idriess as an important step in the transformation of the nation's historiography. He considered himself well placed to contribute to this process as he had spent a significant amount of time in contact with Aboriginal people during "more than half a lifetime's travelling and toiling in the wilder areas of the continent" (*Our Living Stone Age* ix). The preface of *The Red Chief* (1953) asserted there was an onus upon those who had an intimate knowledge of Aborigines to share what they knew (vii). Idriess was willing to share his impressions of Aboriginal society and the disadvantage its members faced.

Idriess' demonstrated interest in Indigenous culture led many to view him as a popular authority on Aboriginal issues. This was demonstrated by his invitation to participate in the 1937 Aboriginal Welfare Conference of Commonwealth and State Authorities. *Man's* full page promotion of Idriess' presence at the conference, entitled "Idriess Speaks For Natives," claimed that "few people are better equipped or experienced to describe, comment, advise on the

subject than world-famous bush-scribe Idriess” (77). The title of the article emphasised the extent to which the Aboriginal community was effectively silenced by the failure of the conference to seek their views directly. Healy presents the conference as an example of the persistent dehumanisation of Aborigines by an expansionist society (5; 6).

Idriess’ address at the 1937 conference concerned the issue of Aboriginal health. Rather than depict Aborigines as sub-humans who could not grasp the principles of basic health and hygiene, he presented what he viewed as an Aboriginal point of view concerning illness and its transmission. He attempted to rationalise behaviours that contributed to the spread of contagious diseases and claimed that, according to Aboriginal culture, illness was something that was willed on a person by another rather than contracted via close physical contact (“Idriess Speaks For Natives” 77). Idriess embraced the role of educator. *The Red Chief*, *The Vanished People* (1955) and *Our Living Stone Age* (1963) made a concerted effort to teach the reader a range of lessons concerning Aboriginal history and culture in an entertaining and accessible manner.

Rather than depict Aboriginal people in accordance with dominant views and ideology, the preface of *The Red Chief* claimed that the novel aimed to present the reader with a portrayal of Aboriginal man that was “quite different to the general idea of him” (vii). He did not depict Aborigines as unfathomable and irrational primitive beings, instead the novel attempted to explain a multitude of Aboriginal customs and behaviours that might appear strange or abhorrent to white sensibilities. Topics Idriess addressed included women stealing, initiation practices, polygamy and a nomadic lifestyle. The inference was that an increase in knowledge concerning Indigenous culture might reduce cultural misunderstandings and

acknowledge the integral role played by Indigenous people in the nation's cultural heritage.

*The Red Chief* is a fictional representation of pre-settlement Aboriginal culture in the Gunnedah region of New South Wales, and in particular the life of a revered Elder whose skeleton had been exhumed and put on display at the Australian Museum in Sydney (xix). The novel is the coming-of-age story of a Aboriginal youth called Red Kangaroo. He became an Elder of renown and was later referred to as the Red Chief. The character was depicted as an intelligent and skilled warrior. As a young man his strong sense of social justice brought him into conflict with the Elders of his community and led to his refusal to accept their continual disregard of long held customs and traditions. The group's cultural shift was viewed by Red Kangaroo as a serious threat because the Elders paid little heed to their people's security and future prosperity (40). For example, the group was placed in a weakened position after the birth rate fell because the Elders had taken all available young women as their wives, rather than giving them to young warriors according to custom. The ensuing stagnation in the population growth rendered the group vulnerable to attack from larger neighbouring groups who frequently sought to expand their territories (149). The fast-paced novel centred on Red Kangaroo's willingness to place his own life in jeopardy for the benefit of his community.

The exceptional youth became his group's saviour by instigating a number of bold plans without the sanction of the Elders. Red Kangaroo's success, leadership abilities and strong focus on his people's future inspired others to unite against the corrupt Elders and re-establish disregarded customs and laws (147). The novel depicted a highly complex society with rational laws and customs designed

to create a sense of cohesion and ensure the group's prosperity. Idriess stated in the preface that "the wild Australian aboriginal, though a true Stone Age man is not, and never has been, the brainless, brutal primitive that many of us believe him to be" (xviii). *The Red Chief* represents a concerted effort to provide an insight into pre-contact Indigenous culture and humanise Aboriginal people by representing their "beliefs and hopes, joys and sorrows, ambitions and hates, good points and general cussedness as surprisingly like ourselves" (vii). The presentation of an Aboriginal point of view was presumptuous and insensitive by modern standards but Idriess' intention was to encourage enquiring readers, who were not simply reading for pleasure, to reconsider their views regarding Indigenous culture and history.

Idriess' writing frequently adopted racist imagery and a paternalist tone, but this did not prevent it from influencing Indigenous readers. Maureen Fuary argues that his novel *Drums of Mer* gained a "measure of authority and authenticity among some Torres Strait readers," and impacted on the Islanders' perceptions and understandings of their past (248). *The Red Chief* also affected an Indigenous population's conception of self as Mitchell Rolls notes that Gunnedah's Aboriginal land council is officially called the Red Chief Local Aboriginal Land Council ("Finding Fault" 185). The choice of name suggests the local Indigenous population could see beyond the writer's hyperbole to "discern perhaps dignity and grace in his counterpoised apocryphal wild man lurking as the undifferentiated Other in the remote and unsettled afar" (185). Rolls argues that scholars should similarly be willing to recognise this subtlety in Idriess' writing.

Idriess frequently used the term "Stone Age" to refer to Aboriginal people and culture. The term might be viewed as an indication of Idriess' adherence to a hierarchy of race, however, he often used the term to highlight the ancient origins

of Indigenous society. *The Vanished People* described aspects of Indigenous cultures and customs, and challenged notions they were intrinsically base and simplistic, via an extended examination of Aboriginal art and its symbolism. Idriess argued that Aboriginal art might appear to be the “childish scribbling of an undeveloped race” but he claimed this was far from the case (57). His examination of Indigenous art argued that it contained many layers of meaning that were foundational to Aboriginal culture. His comparison of aspects of Indigenous culture to that of ancient Egypt (48) encouraged readers to reconsider the depth and richness inherent in this art form. Idriess attempted to shift the reader’s Eurocentric point of view concerning art and challenge the dominant idea that Aboriginal artistic expressions were the work of “uncivilised savages were incapable of true art” (Grishin 60). *The Vanished People* attempted to pique the reader’s interest and inspire them to gain a closer understanding of the nation’s first inhabitants.

In the foreword of *The Vanished People* Idriess encouraged readers to emulate his willingness to examine preconceptions concerning Indigenous culture:

You and I have been yarning together for quite a long time now. Let’s come to a still closer understanding. As you read this book—think! Maybe that’s asking something, but you’re paying good money for it and I’d like you to get your money’s worth ... if, when you put the book down, you do not feel you have learnt a lot—and pleasantly, too, then I shall be disappointed. (v)

Idriess identified a level of arrogance in society’s blind dismissal of that which it did not understand (125;127), and appealed to readers to embark on an intellectual journey of inquiry concerning non-white cultures because

on the return trip you almost feel you are one with it, you have seen, have felt just a glimpse of its might and mystery, it has taught you such a very great amount. And you are a better man for the knowing. (210)

He suggested that Australian society would be enriched if it afforded Indigenous culture a greater level of recognition. In order for this to occur, the reader must learn to draw considered conclusions rather than readily discount another race's cultural expressions as inherently inferior (97). A contemplative approach to race was also advanced in *The Wild North* where Idriess claimed that "almost eagerly we rush into judgments upon our fellow men, when often we cannot fairly judge our own selves" (207). Idriess challenged policies of racial exclusion by encouraging more Australians to seek a considered understanding of other races and cultures. His examination of complex and contentious issues demonstrates Radway's claim that non-fiction middlebrow readers should be viewed as "distinct from the common herd" and "marked by a taste for the weighty as well as a penchant for learning" (109).

Idriess' desire to instruct and educate readers is on full display in *Our Living Stone Age* and its sequel *Our Stone Age Mystery*. Both books attempted to explain a range of Indigenous behaviours, customs, laws and daily routines that Idriess had observed during his journeys throughout central and northern Australia. *Our Living Stone Age* is not a dry descriptive text. The experienced storyteller tempered his educative efforts by adopting a narrative structure designed to humanise members of a society that were readily dismissed by the white majority. Idriess' simultaneous attempt to educate and entertain led Dixon to argue that his writing constantly blurred "the boundaries between ethnography, whose authority they often claim, and romantic fiction, whose excesses they often disavow"

(“Playing Tarzan” 135). The result was an accessible means for readers to not only gain a greater understanding of Aboriginal culture, but to reconsider the view that a great divide separated the Indigenous Other and the settler Australian (Goldie 128). The attempt to humanise Aboriginal people sought to counter the semiotic control that had been effectively employed by settler society (5).

*Our Living Stone Age* covered the lifespan between birth and marriage while *Our Stone Age Mystery* traversed adulthood from this point to death. In the preface of *Our Living Stone Age* Idriess acknowledged that he could not fully reveal a culture of which he was not a member (x). While there was much that Idriess did not understand, he was unequivocal that there was a sense of a shared humanity between black and white. The focus that *Our Living Stone Age* placed on romantic love, family bonds, grief and bereavement presented a range of universal experiences to support Idriess’ claim that “we are all in the same life” (224). The preface outlined his intention to present a narrative that depicted Aborigines living in remote locations as “a human being, and an interesting one” (xii). His efforts to promote a greater interest in Aboriginal society in *Our Living Stone Age*, *The Red Chief* and *The Vanished People* were based on his veneration of pre-white settlement versions of Indigenous culture.

Contact between black and white was viewed negatively by Idriess as he believed that it hastened the demise of “traditional” forms of Indigenous culture and threatened the very existence of Aboriginal society. “Lazy Days in Crocodile Land” outlined his regret that “the white man possesses some irresistible attraction to the black ... I should like to see Arnhem Land and this other last wild area west of the Daly left entirely to the primitive peoples. But they themselves are increasingly seeking the whites” (15). The contradiction between Idriess’



encouragement of urban inhabitants to gain a closer understanding of Indigenous culture with a parallel desire to see Indigenous groups isolated from white society, displayed the racial ambiguities and tensions that dominated the period. Whether safely contained in remote settlements or living alongside white populations in urban populations, Aborigines caused an element of disquiet because they were an inseparable but discomfiting component of the nation's consciousness (Healy 176).

Idriess' nostalgic tendencies were not reserved for the Indigenous community. A number of his *Walkabout* articles placed a wistful focus on disappearing settler lifestyles and customs. Idriess lamented that the passing of a glorious pioneering age had been facilitated by technological advances. "West of the Darling" claimed that outback communities had been stripped of jobs due to the advent of motorised transport and a corresponding decrease in the need for the services of saddlers, harness-makers, wheelwrights, blacksmiths and others who were once integral to the pastoral industry. Idriess mourned the subsequent reduction in the size and vibrancy of many outback communities:

It is food for thought, too, that forty years ago this country gave employment to far greater numbers than it does to-day, and that now quiet bush towns (some quite dead) were once thriving and busy ... Stations that once employed sixty men get along at present with ten. (42)

Another negative outcome of technological change was the increase in the pace of life.

Outback communities had once spent a significant amount of time yarning but Idriess claimed that time was now a luxury many could not spare. He lamented the failure of his contemporaries to congregate in groups to talk and exchange

stories, noting that “you cannot be a ‘character’ when everybody is going somewhere, for no one has time to listen” (“West of the Darling” 43). This view was repeated in Idriess’ 1937 *Walkabout* article “Pearls” where he claimed that the good old “roaring” days had gone and “modernity and depression had come instead” (17). His reverence for traditional outback lifestyles was juxtaposed against a firm belief in the development potential of remote Australia. Was Australia gaining more than it lost from modern developments? Was Australian society regressing or could it re-imagine a new identity? It appeared that Idriess was not sure. The contradictions woven throughout his writing demonstrates that competing visions of nation and history do not exist in isolation, they co-exist.

Although Australian lifestyles had been greatly transformed by the 1930s, Idriess suggested in his *Walkabout* article “Darwin” that images of the settler past, especially of frontier conflict, continued to dominate the psyche of the white communities living in Northern Australia much more than those living in the south (37). His writing sought to remind urban readers of their rich settler heritage by consistently lauding the stereotypical image of the bushman. “Arnhem Land” feted the few living remnants of the pioneering generation. The tenacity of a seventy-five year old man who had successfully undertaken an arduous trek through remote and waterless country was extolled because it was a journey many younger men would not contemplate (31). Idriess attempted to cultivate a renewed sense of respect for past generations despite placing a concurrent focus on the damage that pastoral and farming practices had inflicted on the environment, and the disruption white settlements caused Indigenous communities. Once again he highlighted ambivalence and contradiction.

Idriess revered settler history and was one of many writers who continued to privilege outback characters and scenes as Australia's definitive reality (Strauss 119). Yet, he was aware that the preoccupations of outback communities were far removed from the realities faced by urban readers born into the "Space Age" (*The Wild North* iv). In *Our Living Stone Age* he pondered: "It is interesting to try to imagine what we and our children's children will make of our future" (xiii). When de Berg asked Idriess for his views concerning what might be done to address the disadvantage that future generations of Aborigines faced, he refused to give a definitive answer: "The Aboriginal question is difficult to answer as conditions across the continent are so different" ("Interview by Hazel de Berg"). The writer was aware that a single and broad brushstroke policy would not prove successful as he believed that "what pertains to one part of the continent doesn't to another" ("Interview by Hazel de Berg"). Idriess had realised at a young age that white interference in Aboriginal matters generated discord and disruption.

In a 1919 *Bulletin* article Idriess suggested that the views of Indigenous people should be sought by those writing policies affecting their lives:

Some interested Queenslanders are agitating the Government to muster all aboriginals and transplant them to a coastal island or a big reserve on Cape York. The idea is to build houses for them and clear the land in expectation that, at the end of three years, Black Brother will be able to keep himself out of the proceeds of his own toil ... Of course, the person most concerned is not consulted. (*Gouger of the Bulletin* 54)

These views were at odds with official rhetoric which argued that white officials, agencies and protection boards were best placed to decide what Aboriginal people needed (Macintyre 146). Idriess' engagement with race ranged from blatant racism

to sensitive inquiry, but it always exposed Australia as a country of competing paradigms and unresolved settler anxieties. Most critics focus on sections of his writing that are racially abhorrent to modern readers, however, his writing deserves further critical attention as he also advocated for greater cultural understanding and challenged western notions of race.

Idriess relished his role as a bush storyteller. He was familiar with the importance of storytelling in Aboriginal society and admired the manner in which Aboriginal people used it to reflect on past events, effect social cohesion and impart cultural knowledge. One of his 1925 *Bulletin* articles recounted the skills of a venerated Aboriginal storyteller who knew “all the legends and superstitions off by heart... Such a grand teller of the deeds of mythical heroes does he become that finally he wraps himself around in their cloak of valour and becomes a mighty man himself” (*Gouger of the Bulletin* 88). Idriess’ indisputable storytelling skills enabled him to shed his itinerant lifestyle and become a writer of renown and to cloak himself metaphorically in fame, or notoriety as some might argue. The preface of *Men of the Jungle* revealed the satisfaction Idriess gained from the continued demand for his outback yarns:

The publishers have asked me to write an account of the more adventurous part of my life ... At the time, the experiences here told didn’t appear to me very adventurous—nor do they now. But city folk, I find, look at these events differently to those familiar with the vicissitudes of a wanderer’s life.

(vii)

The popularity of Idriess’ fiction and non-fiction demonstrated the interest of urban readers in the nation’s settler heritage. Well aware of his potential influence, Idriess used his writing to persuade readers to develop a greater appreciation and

awareness of uniquely Australian experiences and histories—both Indigenous and settler in origin.

### Chapter Three

#### Arthur W. Upfield: Crime and Justice in Pastoral Australia

The leading article of *Walkabout*'s inaugural issue was written by the outspoken crime writer and bushman Arthur W. Upfield (1890-64). "Coming Down With Cattle" displays the writer's admiration for the droving teams that walked cattle vast distances to markets servicing Australia's largest cities: "The uninitiated would have thought that drovers led easy and delightful lives ... [yet they] have to wage constant battle with refractory beasts whose behaviour cannot be estimated one minute ahead" (11). This vibrant tale of hardship is informed by Upfield's familiarity with the pastoral industry. After emigrating from England in 1911 the young wanderer soon left Adelaide and headed inland, where for several decades he worked in a variety of itinerant jobs often situated on pastoral enterprises.

The fiction and non-fiction Upfield produced whether living in the outback or in suburbia placed a strong focus on non-urban landscapes and communities. This chapter examines his *Walkabout* contributions and reveals that, rather than simplistically glorifying settler history, they offered a perceptive appraisal of settler history. Several articles outlined the devastating effects the colonial process had wrought on the environment via insensitive agricultural practices and the introduction of voracious animal species. He also highlighted tensions generated by the displacement and marginalisation of Aboriginal people. Upfield's non-fiction and fiction alike depicted the establishment of white Australia as a fraught and ambivalent process.

Upfield's crime novels provide an insight into life in remote Australia during the mid-twentieth century. The twenty-nine books that comprise his

successful “Bony” series were published between 1928 and 1964 (one was published posthumously). They are of interest because the main protagonist, Detective-Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte, was the offspring of an Aboriginal mother and a Caucasian father. The children of such pairings were commonly referred to in the period and Upfield’s writing as “half-castes.” The Detective-Inspector, known as Bony, enjoyed educational and vocational opportunities not afforded to most Aborigines (Macintyre 287). As a university graduate who rose to a position of seniority in the Queensland Police Department, Bony was the antithesis of the average mid-twentieth-century Aboriginal male and a personification of the unresolved racial tensions that Upfield had observed in remote Australia. Although Upfield was dismissed as a commercial writer who wrote for the market (Nile, “Literary Democracy” 145), his literary engagement with race was nuanced. He unsettled dominant notions of race by ascribing the most agency in each novel to his Aboriginal detective. A range of Upfield’s Indigenous characters simultaneously reinforced and challenged dominant racial ideology, thereby highlighting the contradictory nature of Australia’s race relations.

This chapter builds on Salhia Ben-Messahel’s suggestion that Australian crime fiction

allows marginal characters to address the public, subverting standard beliefs about Australian society and the history of European settlement, exposing the dilemma of a nation looking to the future and wondering about its post-colonial identity and its European heritage. (142)

An examination of three Bony novels set on large outback stations owned by successive generations of white pastoralists reveals the intimate and entwined nature of black and white relationships in remote Australia during the mid-

twentieth century. *The Bone is Pointed* (1938), *Bushranger of the Skies* (1940) and *Cake in the Hat Box* (1955) raise the question: Who had the most legitimate sense of belonging on pastoral enterprises that had dispossessed Indigenous populations and were inherited by descendants of settler Australians? Upfield's novels were not simplistic murder mysteries, rather they recognised the ambivalence that resided at the heart of settler history and refuted the dominant image of Aborigines as an inferior race with nothing of value to contribute to Australian society. By focusing on issues such as racial inequality and justice the books contributed to a postcolonial dialogue concerning identity, place and displacement (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 8)

### **Biography**

Upfield's background and personal life exerted a strong influence on all forms of his writing, therefore, this examination benefits from a biographical introduction. Several biographies of the writer have been undertaken. Upfield's second partner Jessica Uren Hawke published *Follow My Dust!* (1957), a sympathetic collection of biographical anecdotes. More comprehensive examinations of Upfield's life are provided by A. J. Milnor's *Arthur W. Upfield: Life and Times of Bony's Man* (2008) and Travis B. Lindsey's "Arthur William Upfield: A Biography" (2005). Milnor and Lindsey explore the origins of the wanderlust that dominated much of Upfield's life. Lindsey suggests that Upfield became disconnected from his nuclear family at a young age after frequent bouts of illness resulted in prologued periods spent with his extended family (19; 23). Another causal factor in Upfield's relegation to the margins of his immediate family appeared to be his unwillingness to meet familial and social expectations. As a consequence Upfield was not



welcomed into the family's drapery business despite being the eldest of four sons (22). In a *Bulletin* interview Upfield made light of the situation by suggesting with typical self-deprecating humour that "my father sent me here from England because he was sure I'd never get the fare back again" (Rolfe 16).

The independent young emigrant willingly embarked on his Australian adventure as he later claimed that he succumbed to an insidious and creeping wanderlust early in life ("My Life Outback No.5: Tramping by the Darling" 11). After arriving in Adelaide in 1911 he worked briefly as clerk, farmhand and hotel cook but he soon sought escape from what he termed a life of drudgery ("Beyond the Mirage" 23). A thirst for freedom and adventure led him to inland Australia where he worked in a variety of jobs including trapper, vermin hunter, prospector, station hand, cook and fence rider. He relished the sense of independence that an itinerant lifestyle afforded and claimed that those "smitten with the wanderlust can never, never grow bored or satiated or lost by too much travel, too much freedom" ("My Life Outback" 11). The young Englishman found the stimulation he was looking for in the outback, where he was greatly impressed by outback communities:

Never before had I met such people; never have I met their like beyond Central Australia. Their language was terrific, saved from crudeness by its artistry. Their leg pulling was severe; tempers quick, and fists hard. Their hearts were big, their humour dry, and the standard of general knowledge surprisingly high. ("Beyond the Mirage" 28)

It is evident throughout Upfield's writing that his admiration for non-urban Australian lifestyles and landscapes never waned.

His youthful wanderings were interrupted by the outbreak of war in 1914. Upfield enlisted with the AIF and headed overseas. While based in Egypt in 1915 he met and quickly married Australian nurse Anne Douglass. In the post-war period Upfield attempted to settle with his wife and infant son near his parents' Gosport home, but in an unpublished memoir the writer outlined his inability to adapt to civilian and domestic life ("Beyond the Mirage" 135). The restrictive nature of the English class system was a particular source of irritation: "With ever growing clarity I came to see that neither my wife nor I would be happy in England ... A tree may be transplanted once with benefit. To transplant it a second time often kills it" (136). A return to Australia seemed inevitable yet this did not occur until 1921. After Upfield arrived back in Australia he found employment in a factory but he soon yearned to break free from suburban routines (Lindsey 41).

Unable to settle, Upfield regularly left his family to retreat inland to the landscapes and jobs he had enjoyed before the war. He claimed that the return to his pre-war lifestyle made him feel "like a man who, having long been confined to a sick room, was taking his first short walk in his garden" ("Beyond the Mirage" 148). This statement was a reference to the war-induced psychological problems Upfield battled against (239). The years spent roaming the outback in the post-war period were described as so beneficial they "revived the growth of my mind and slowly set my feet on the right track called ambition" (230). Remote Australia was a refuge but Upfield quickly realised that it too had been irrevocably changed by the war. The pace and range of urbanisation disturbed him, so too did an erosion in the bonds of community. He adopted the term "Australia proper" to refer to his idealised vision of pre-war scenes and communities in which black and white Australians played an integral role (Milnor 101).

Writing had long been Upfield's favoured pastime; he worked by day and often wrote by night. He soon gained publication in various periodicals but he dreamt of becoming a full-time writer. His 1927 letter to a friend outlined his desire to

earn sufficient with my pen to make me independent of rabbit, foxes and roos, and raise me from the gutter in which I have been so long. Working on stations and camping under bridges is quite all right as an experience, but eventually it begins to tire and the lack of decent food on a well furnished table begins to make itself felt. (Letter to E. Verco Whyte 1927)

Literary success was achieved a year later when *House of Cain* (1928) was published in London, but becoming a published author did not immediately alter Upfield's circumstances. A letter written while he lived in Western Australia outlined the difficulties faced by those attempting to earn a living in remote locations:

Conditions over here are bad and threaten to become worse as the winter approaches. All improvement work on the stations has ceased, and most of the regular hands have been sacked ... And I am very thankful that I have a job. (Letter to E. Verco Whyte February 1930)

In 1933 Upfield made the long awaited transition from itinerant worker to full-time writer when he gained employment with Melbourne's *Herald* newspaper, however, the fiercely independent writer struggled to settle in an office environment. He battled to meet strict deadlines and heavily prescribed style requirements. As a result the appointment was terminated after six months (Rolfe 16). Upfield claimed that his employers "wanted serials written to order and in five minutes and I found

I simply could not do it” (Letter to E. Verco Whyte November 1934). The setback did not diminish Upfield’s determination to develop a writing career.

Upfield struggled financially after leaving the *Herald* so the opportunity to contribute to *Walkabout* was opportune (Letter to E. Verco Whyte November 1934). Between 1934 and 1949 he contributed eleven articles that focused on his outback experiences. Topics included rabbit trapping, camel transport, vermin fence patrolling, droving, fishing, the pearling and pastoral industries, and his travels through central and northern Australia. Upfield’s writing for *Walkabout* portrayed life in non-urban Australia as exotic and harsh yet incredibly rewarding. The continent was described in “This Jealous Land” as containing an “astonishing bounty in those areas possessing the most favourable climate” (39). The difficulties faced by those attempting to develop remote regions were presented in a dramatic manner: “in [the] heat rabbits forced into the sunlight are liable to be struck dead, and birds are likely to drop dead from trees. I once saw a crow fold up in flight and drop like a stone” (39). Upfield’s greatest literary talent was his ability to describe vividly the outback landscapes and communities he admired.

Upfield’s writing style proved popular with domestic readers but his publishing success in American and European markets established his position as one of the envied few who were able to support themselves financially from their writing (Hetherington, “Bony at Home and Abroad” 2). Upfield’s entry into the lucrative North American crime market occurred in 1943 when three of his Bony novels were published by Doubleday (Hetherington, “In Their Different Ways Classics” 294). David Carter’s work on the Australian publishing industry outlined the extent to which the American publishing industry provided Australian writers with additional publishing opportunities, access to book clubs, editorial attention

and commercial focus (“Transpacific or Transatlantic Traffic?” 350). This was certainly true of Upfield’s experience; his acceptance into the large and lucrative American market was well-timed because crime writing experienced a post-war boom (351).

A 1954 *Sydney Morning Herald* article examined Upfield’s strengths and his popularity in America:

He is more interested in creating an Australian atmosphere than in weaving an orthodox mystery. The setting, not the puzzle, is his first concern. For this reason, rather than for any ingenuity of plot, 17 of Mr. Upfield’s mystery novels have enjoyed great success in the United States ... Where the average American mystery novel sells 3,500 copies, Napoleon Bonaparte sells between 30,000 and 40,000. The Mystery Writers of America Guild has acknowledged this success by making Mr. Upfield its sole foreign member. (“Mystery Writer Describes Australia to U. S. Readers” 2)

Upfield’s membership to the Mystery Writers of America Guild was a significant professional accolade that enabled his novels to reach an international audience. An indication of his success is evident in his claim that by 1957 he had sold 1.8 million novels (Ross 40). The income generated from international sales enabled Upfield to settle into a comfortable middle-class existence in suburbia with Hawke and her son (Lindsey 2).

Milnor lauds Upfield’s crime writing achievements by suggesting that Bony was not only a serious rival to Sherlock Holmes (199), he was also “the most famous detective of the twentieth century” (6). American accolades reached fever pitch in Ray B. Browne’s claim that Upfield had produced “some of the finest and

strongest novels of crime fiction of all times and all places” (251). This is an exaggeration but it is undeniable that the Bony series continues to enjoy a measure of popularity.<sup>2</sup> The crime series formed the basis of a television series in 1972, a pilot television movie 1992 in (Lindsey 250), a documentary in 2007 and a television movie in 2009. The latest telemovie, “3 Acts of Murder,” dramatised Upfield’s unwitting involvement in several murders perpetrated in 1929 and a subsequent murder trial.

The 1932 murder trial was dubbed by the media as the “Murchison Murders.” The defendant, an itinerant worker known as Snowy Rowles, was suspected of killing three men and disposing of their bodies in accordance with methods outlined in Upfield’s novel *The Sands of Windee* (1931). Rowles had been privy to Upfield’s discussions concerning undetectable murder methods in outback Australia, however, Rowles discovered that getting away with murder was more difficult than writing about it. He left evidence at one of the murder scenes that led to his conviction and hanging.

The media widely reported this strange case of life imitating fiction. Upfield’s involvement as a witness at Rowles’ murder trial added interest to the media coverage. When questioned whether Rowles had participated in conversations regarding the disposal of a dead body the writer revealed his belligerent personality: “Look! It was a small room and you don’t think he sat there dumb all night. Certainly he joined in” (“Rowles on Trial” 2). The publicity that Upfield’s colourful personae and novel received ensured the book experienced a

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<sup>2</sup> In “Bony at Home and Abroad” Hetherington notes “The Bony Bulletin” a newsletter edited and published by Philip T. Asdell, which ran between 1981 and 1991, and “Marsupial Mutterings”, a fan based newsletter published by Jan Finder which ran between 1994 and 2007. The websites “Arthur Upfield: Creator of ‘Bony’” <https://sites.google.com/site/upfieldbony/home> and “Arthur Upfield Official Site” [http://arthurupfield.com/main/page\\_whats\\_new.html](http://arthurupfield.com/main/page_whats_new.html) provide a biography, bibliography and list articles of interest.

revival in sales. Upfield stated that while the novel had been published to little acclaim in 1931, a year later “the case of Snowy Rowles gave it an undeserved reputation” (“Beyond the Mirage” 348).

If Upfield had been unaware of the commercial benefit to be gained from a high public profile prior to the “Murchison Murders” trial, he was certainly cognisant of the benefits afterwards. He actively cultivated the personae of his fictional detective as a means of generating interest in his novels. As mentioned in Chapter One Upfield sent Christmas cards in 1948 that were ostensibly from Bony. The character was also attributed as the writer of the introduction to Hawke’s biography of her partner. Upfield’s willingness to blend fact and fiction ensured that conflicting stories exist concerning whether Bony was based on one or a series of Aboriginal men the writer met while working in the outback. A 1929 letter stated that “Bony was a half caste nig I met in Queensland” (Letter to E. Verco Whyte 1929), while a 1935 *Bulletin* article outlined a number of intelligent mixed-race Aborigines the writer encountered during outback travels who shared characteristics attributed to Bony: Billy D. was described as having Nordic facial features; Ned H. and Nap B. had brilliant intellects; and the special area of interest of Nap B. was Napoleonic history. Upfield claimed these men might make good citizens if given the chance (“The Half-Caste” 38).

Another possible candidate was revealed in “Beyond the Mirage” where Upfield outlined a period spent in the company of an unnamed “half-caste” swagman with a “dark brown face, sharp Nordic features and blue eyes” (187). This man not only physically resembled Upfield’s infamous detective, he shared aspects of Bony’s character; the swagman was free from self consciousness and shyness (187), and had a mind that “was a storehouse of knowledge of the kind

obtained by wide reading as well as thorough observation” (189). Upfield claimed that he was greatly impressed by the stockman who “showed me to what height of efficiency a human being could rise” (189), and who “permitted me to see into his heart and regard the picture therein of the eternal warfare between the influences of his black and white parents” (190). Upfield’s account of this interaction may have been entirely fictional as Hawke suggested that Bony was an amalgam of a number of Aboriginal men. She claimed that the most influential of this group was Leon Wood, a tracker whose outstanding detection skills matched those attributed to Bony (238). What is clear is that Upfield consciously developed and nurtured the personae of his most successful literary creation. The continued publication of the Bony novels demonstrates the writer’s success in his endeavour, so too does his claim that “Bony is the one people are interested in—not me” (“Author for Your Bookshelf” 32). This statement remains accurate as the character dominates discussions, reviews and criticism of Upfield’s writing.

It is intriguing that during a period in which miscegenation inspired what Kerryn Goldsworthy termed as “deep anxieties” (124), a broad range of domestic readers embraced a part-Aboriginal character who held a position of power. This may have been the result of an increasing interest in Aboriginal culture, or it may have given comfort to those who viewed Bony as an oddity whose very success underlined the inability of his race to assimilate into mainstream Australian society. The reaction of the Aboriginal community was less opaque; Upfield has been consistently criticised by its members for his representations of race. Aboriginal crime writer Philip McLaren suggests in an ABC Radio National program that this censure is more a reflection of the community’s widespread objection of any literary appropriation of Aboriginal culture, rather than a specific reaction to



Upfield's writing ("The Arthur Upfield Mystery—Bony"). This may be so, but Upfield's novels adopted language and negative racial stereotypes that cause offence to modern sensibilities. Those who look beyond the dated language and racial representations can argue that Upfield's novels do more than reflect and sensationalise dominant mid-twentieth-century racial ideology. The focus his writing placed on outback communities containing black and white members facilitates critical examinations of the ambiguities that dominated the period's race relations. This ensures that Upfield's writing is worthy of further critical examination.

Upfield's literary engagement with race, identity and landscape has been subject to more critical attention than Ion Idriess, Ernestine Hill or John K. Ewers. Diane Stevenson classifies Upfield's novels as cautionary tales that raise an alarm concerning the population's increasing sense of removal from the natural world (153). Glen Ross identifies a critical thread in Upfield's writing and argues the novels unsettle white society's homogenous sense of identity by presenting an array of conflicting ideas concerning race (40). Upfield's depiction of the uncomfortable realities inherent in white society's concurrent and conflicting desires to exclude and assimilate mixed-race Aborigines, reveals that race is a construct that is difficult to contain and control.

The acknowledgement that Upfield's novels contributed something of value to an ongoing dialogue concerning race, landscape and identity is evident in Kay Tourney Souter's examination of Australia's treatment of children with a mixed-racial heritage. She recognises Upfield's willingness to invert dominant notions of race and power, and rework the metaphors of theft, abduction and murder (22). The most recent recognition of the complexity that Souter identifies in Upfield's writing

is found in *Investigating Arthur Upfield* (2012), which makes the collaborative assertion that Upfield's writing positively added to his adopted nation's literary and cultural history (Hetherington, "Introduction" xvii). This growing body of research reveals that Upfield's fiction and non-fiction provide a nuanced insight into the ambiguities at the heart of mid-twentieth-century society and literature.

### ***Walkabout***

Upfield's fiction and non-fiction were replete with vivid descriptions of desolate outback landscapes and character archetypes. In 1933 a columnist using the pseudonym of "Bodleian" supported the claim of A. L. Purse (a member of the Australian Literary Society) that more writers should examine urban life ("Do Australian Authors Write too Little of the Cities?" 7). The issue remained topical over thirty years later when the continued fascination of mid-twentieth-century writers with non-urban Australia was labelled by Sidney J. Baker as a strange form of literary myopia ("City Themes Being Ignored" 82). It is undeniable that outback stories and imagery could not represent the lived reality of the majority of mid-twentieth-century Australians (Strauss 119), yet the popularity of writers such as Idriess, Frank Clune, Bill Harney, William Hatfield and Jack McLaren, plus the longevity of *Walkabout* magazine, indicated that despite the physical and psychological distance separating urban populations from the bush it continued to influence the national imaginary.

Upfield did not present an uncritical vision of non-urban landscapes, people and history. His writing certainly venerated pre-war society but it also displayed a willingness to question widely accepted "truths". This was most apparent in Upfield's engagement with race. His writing was frequently contradictory but

consistently prompted readers to reassess their views concerning the nation's first inhabitants. The representation of Aboriginal characters who led respected and productive lives (Bony is the most obvious example) provided readers with an opportunity to examine the disparity between reality and a fictional world that allowed Aborigines to participate on a more equal footing. The ability of middlebrow writing to resist cultural hegemony and stimulate critical thought is significant as J. J. Healy suggests it is "difficult for a people submerged in history to see the world and themselves with full clarity" (6). Upfield's concern for the relegation of Indigenous people to the social position with the least amount of power and autonomy was present in much of his writing.

Upfield's 1933 *Daily News* article "Future of the Aborigines" questioned government policy and the white population's general sense of apathy concerning Aboriginal disadvantage. He identified two distinct but equally inadequate schools of thought regarding measures that could be employed to address the issue:

The 'let 'em alone school' and that which would force every blackfellow on to a reserve. Although sincere enough, both schools are wrong ... As a nation wishing to give the blackfellow a 'fair deal', a course to be followed between the two schools mentioned is open to us. The goal to aim at is equitable justice between the white and the black, which would be entirely different to the mockery of justice meted out to the black fellow today. (6)

Upfield's statement reveals his support for a significant shift in the opportunities afforded to Aborigines who were unable to counteract negative racial stereotypes and contribute as equal members of society. He continued to promulgate this view two years later when he claimed that "it is time the notion that our half-castes are degenerate was debunked" ("The Half-caste" 38). Similar assertions were

presented in Upfield's contributions to *Walkabout* but so too are opposing arguments.

Upfield's 1935 *Walkabout* article "Men, Sheep and Far Horizons" recounted a visit to a remote outback station. On the journey to the homestead a number of Aboriginal artefacts scattered along the roadside prompted the writer to consider the level of disruption experienced by Indigenous societies since the advent of white settlement:

To-day may be found the bones and the skulls of the slain in a fierce aboriginal battle. Among the drifts, too, may be found the flat nardoo stones on which the women pounded seeds to flour, mute representatives of tribal peace and plenty. At points around the lake's shore remain great heaps of the shells of the mussels collected by the natives when this land was softened and beautified by sheets of permanent water. (15)

This passage may be viewed as a lamentation for the passing of an idealised version of pre-white contact Aboriginal society, but others could interpret it as an affirmation of the ability of Aboriginal people to adjust and thrive. Mitchell Rolls' examination of *Walkabout*'s photographic depiction of Aborigines concludes that many images indicated that Indigenous people were not "doomed by the superiority of modernity" ("Picture Imperfect" 30). Instead, they were depicted as "engaged participants in the changes being wrought upon their lands" (31). Upfield's first-hand knowledge of Aborigines informed his depictions of the resilience and adaptability of Indigenous Australians.

The capacity of Aborigines to adapt to life on the margins of settler society was highlighted in Upfield's account of an impromptu meeting with an Aboriginal stockman in "Men, Sheep and Far Horizons." Relics of the stockman's ancestors

lay along the roadside. They had presumably lived on the land for thousands of years before white settlers staked ownership but Upfield was not greeted with suspicion, anger or reserve. Instead, the writer was struck by the warm welcome he received from a member of a dispossessed population: “A big, round black face beams down at us as though we were near and dear relatives. The descendant of that tribe, perhaps, who defended so valiantly their camping ground beside Lake Ratcatcher” (15). The happy nature of the stockman may indicate the ability of Aborigines to establish satisfying roles in the pastoral industry, or it may be viewed as an indication of the simple and childlike nature of a primitive people ill-suited to life in modern Australian society. The reader was left to draw their own conclusions. Upfield’s non-fiction consistently prompted the reader to consider the lived experience of displaced Indigenous populations, which illustrates Ina Habermann’s claim that middlebrow writing provided “an imaginative projection of lived experience conducive to a negotiation of identity” (35). Upfield’s *Walkabout* articles also encouraged the reader to re-assess settler history.

An allegorical examination of the upheaval wrought on Aboriginal society by white settlement was provided in Upfield’s 1935 *Walkabout* article “Hosts Hidden in the Bush.” The article depicted a series of interactions between native and introduced animals who competed for access to a remote waterhole during the height of summer in the north-west of New South Wales. Kangaroos were representative of Aborigines; they were described as graceful, noble, and community-loving (24). Their behaviour at the waterhole indicated they were intimidated by the rapacious introduced species inundating the landscape, who represented white settlers. The kangaroos sat “as motionless as the carved gods of savage tribes, longing to reach the water but not daring to come closer without the

protection of the night” (24). They delayed slaking their thirst to avoid interacting with a succession of insatiable interlopers.

The first of the foreign species to inundate the waterhole were sheep. The approach of a large mob was ominously preceded by a dust cloud that threatened “to fall forward and bury the wells and the plain” (24). This image was suggestive of the manner in which white settlement inundated the landscape and displaced Indigenous populations in order to stake an unassailable claim over the country and its resources (Macintyre 67). This mindset ensured that after Upfield’s sheep reached the water source they immediately took what they needed and paid little heed to the presence of the Indigenous population and their prior claims or immediate needs.

The innate wariness of the kangaroos in “Hosts Hidden in the Bush” was representative of the divide between black and white. The seemingly insurmountable gap between the races in the mid-twentieth century was evident in the manner in which the overwhelmingly large numbers of sheep presented an indomitable force that usurped Indigenous inhabitants. Upfield adopted martial terminology to describe the roles, organisation and behaviours of the sheep. The leader of the mob was a female who assumed the unassailable position of a general who marched ahead of her “sub-leaders and their lines” (24). This image was suggestive of Britannia, the triumphant figure who represented a nation that had colonised vast swathes of the globe. The imposing female sheep staked her claim of dominion over the landscape via the effective control of her straining and pushing cohort which successfully intimidated the wary kangaroos.

The response of the kangaroos was to defer to the intruders and to “hop to either side to give passage to the sheep” (24). The kangaroos did not wish to draw

attention to themselves or bring themselves into direct conflict or competition with the dominant majority, even if their inaction ensured they must forgo access to a vital resource. The wariness of the native animals in this episode suggested that previous encounters with the implacable sheep had been so negative they avoided future contact. Upfield's depiction of cross-cultural contact did not cast the sheep in a favourable light; the indigenous animals were the focus of his empathy.

Upfield's sheep left the waterhole after they drank their fill yet the kangaroos did not move or approach the water. It becomes apparent they were awaiting the arrival of another voracious and introduced species—the rabbit. The first wave of these animals was also portrayed in martial terms; the first arrivals were described as the vanguard of an approaching army (24). The image of invasion was a reference to the process of white settlement that was an unstoppable juggernaut which disrupted Indigenous culture and lifestyles (Van Toorn 19), and caused environmental degradation in many areas (Macintyre 130). The rabbits and by implication white settlers cut a swathe of devastation through the countryside. The rapacious animals failed to sit comfortably within the landscape they had defiled. Upfield's narrative contradicted the dominant historical narrative that suggested the developments of settlers had largely improved the landscape. "Hosts Hidden in the Bush" supports Stevenson's claim that Upfield portrayed the Australian landscape as a fallen Eden (151). The depiction of the nation as a corrupted paradise was reflected in Upfield's serpentine description of the rabbits' movements. The incoming deluge of rabbits rippled and flowed across the landscape making "soft slithering noises" ("Hosts Hidden in the Bush" 25) and leaving desolation in their wake.

Upfield's love of idyllic landscapes untouched by white settlement was also evident in his 1949 *Walkabout* article "The Vermin Fences of Western Australia." The stands of majestic gum and wattle trees around Lake Campion were described as a refuge that had previously offered Upfield welcome shelter from cold winters and hot summers. His disappointment at the damage caused to this pristine landscape by the ever encroaching presence of farming settlements was evident: "I was dismayed ... on hearing the devil's noise of the axe, and during the months that followed, spaces grew in the forest, and the trees crashed down, and the heat and the cold entered and destroyed that which we loved" (20). The ultimate insult was that "after all that destruction, the farms have been abandoned for lack of the rain which the trees brought, and no one can ever stand the salmon gums up again" (20). Upfield presented a disturbing image of the poor custodianship of white communities who stripped their surrounds of resources, seemingly without much care for the future.

Upfield presented another extreme example of environmental degradation in "The Vermin Fences of Western Australia," where he claimed to have witnessed a rare and dramatic mass migration of a large group of rabbits who had outstripped their surrounds of all available food resources. He dramatically described the movement of these desperate animals across the landscape as they searched for verdant and unspoilt environs (17). The rabbits' relentless demand on limited resources not only threatened indigenous species, it placed their own existence in doubt. The article presented an ominous warning concerning the potential for unchecked developments to cause environmental devastation.

Upfield's invasion-themed article concluded with an account of extreme measures adopted by a group of Lake Campion farmers who figuratively declared



war on emus. He claimed that the bird had proven so destructive to wheat crops that farmers successfully petitioned a local military unit to use their machine guns to defend the crops and drive the birds from the district. Upfield stated that “the resultant slaughter was heavy but not wholly successful because the birds would not wait to be mown down by machine-gun bullets but ran helter-skelter in all directions through the growing crops” (20). Murray Johnson writes of similar incidents in Western Australia where 1930s farmers working marginal land had little tolerance for damages caused by emus. He outlines circumstances in which farmers in the Campion-Walgoolan district resorted to a bizarre military-styled campaign against emus that was similar to that described by Upfield. The brutal recourse was employed by farmers who feared for their livelihoods as they battled low commodity prices, drought, introduced vermin and indigenous species (147). The conflict was reflective of episodes of frontier conflict that were instigated by real and imagined threats posed by Aborigines to the success of white settlements (Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier* 94 ). “The Vermin Fences of Western Australia” demonstrated Upfield’s empathy for marginalised and dispossessed Indigenous populations and challenged the notion that the settlement of Australia was a peaceful and unequivocal success, a view some continue to hold (Macintyre 60).

A large portion of Upfield’s writing critiqued settler history and revealed his discomfort with a national story that failed to recognise its Indigenous heritage. The Bony series critiqued the containment and control of Aboriginal people by official and informal means that prevented them from taking advantage of the educational and vocational opportunities afforded to the majority of Australians. Upfield claimed that the perception that Aboriginal people were inherently

incapable of successfully integrating into society was based on ignorance. He argued that “it is to be greatly regretted that the opinion of the ignorant prevails in Australia Proper” (“Beyond the Mirage” 253). This view is evident in several Bony novels in which Upfield attempted to counteract a general lack of concern for Aboriginal groups displaced by the formation of large outback stations.

*The Bone is Pointed*, *Bushranger of the Skies* and *Cake in the Hat Box* present a range of white characters who displayed a strong sense of assurance they had rightfully inherited their extensive properties from stoic and industrious pioneering forebears. Despite an awareness that the formation of these properties disenfranchised Indigenous groups, Upfield’s powerful landowning characters seldom expressed moral doubts concerning their elevated positions. Instead they adopted the role of benevolent dictator and attempted to control displaced Aboriginal populations. Upfield subverted the land owners’ attempts to maintain a traditional balance of power via the depiction of a number of Indigenous characters who had an equal amount of agency. Catriona Elder defines agency as

some capacity to respond to the circumstances of life in ways that can lead to the world better reflecting your understanding of how the world should be ... Some citizens will have limited agency because they are poor and disenfranchised, so their ability to make an impact on the story of Australia may be limited. (*Being Australian* 9)

Mid-twentieth-century society afforded non-white races little agency yet attempts to dominate Indigenous people were often incomplete or ineffectual. Attempts to remove Aborigines to reserves for their protection contrasted with demands for their involvement in the pastoral industry (Macintyre 146; 105) This ensured that a disconnect existed between the rhetoric of white superiority and the realities faced

by those living in remote locations. Upfield's landowning characters engaged in a complex web of self-deception as they refused to recognise their dependence on Aboriginal people, or acknowledge the tensions generated by unresolved issues surrounding land ownership and the right to belong.

### ***The Bone is Pointed***

The sense of anxiety generated by "repressed or denied knowledge that Australia is someone else's place" (Elder, *Being Australian* 17) is evident in Upfield's examination of the dynamic interplay between dispossessed Indigenous groups and their usurpers. His writing supports Elder's conclusion that the national story has long been dominated by the experiences and desires of powerful groups (27).

Upfield's engagement with race gave readers an opportunity to scrutinise settler history and contemporary Aboriginal disadvantage. The ability of mid-twentieth-century literature to engage with complex social issues was identified by Goldsworthy, who claims that from the 1920s "shifts in attitude, from the simplest kind of colonial racism to the complexities of contemporary identity politics, can be tracked in fiction as the century progresses" (122). *The Bone is Pointed* highlighted the many obstacles that impeded social change and in particular the resistance of those in power to ascribe agency to powerless racial groups.

The dynamics between white and black characters in *The Bone is Pointed* reflected the nation's long history of unresolved racial tensions and the fallibility of dominant racial ideology. Events in the novel took place on two neighbouring outback stations. One landowner paid little heed to the wellbeing of Aborigines who lived on his station while the other assumed the role of a benevolent protector. It might be supposed that Upfield's novel would conclude that the efforts of the

second landowner were superior to the first, however, his narrative was neither simplistic nor naive. Although the two landowners treated Aborigines very differently, the Indigenous people living on both stations were subject to strict controls and afforded little opportunity to overcome their social disadvantage.

The Aboriginal benefactor in *The Bone is Pointed* was John Gordon, a young man whose large outback station was inherited from his deceased father and pioneering grandparents. Gordon and his mother were effusive in their attempts to convince Bony of their munificence towards Aborigines dispossessed by the district's pastoral industry. The displaced inhabitants were offered the Gordons' vision of a sanctuary; they were provided with a good camp site in return for the provision of all the labour required by the station. Despite the Gordons' concern about the wellbeing of Aboriginal people, Upfield depicted an underlying level of paternalism and self-interest in Gordon's use of possessive terms to describe his Aboriginal workforce: "We always call them our people. My father did. So did my grandfather" (125). The novel revealed that the objectification of a marginalised group contributed to their powerless state.

This young pastoralist and his mother believed they were upholding a proud tradition instigated by a forebear who had appointed himself as an Aboriginal defender after witnessing an episode of frontier conflict (32). Gordon's grandfather had been a horrified observer of the slaughter of an Aboriginal group near the junction of the Darling River and the Murray: "They were all shot down, first the men and then the women and children to the smallest baby. The only crime those blacks committed was to offer objection to their land being taken from them, and the food the land gave them" (126). Repulsed by white brutality, unable to influence the actions of other pastoralists and wracked by settler guilt, three

generations of the Gordon family were convinced that the best course of action was to offer Aboriginal people a level of protection. Sanctuary came at a cost because it was dependant on Aboriginal compliance with the Gordons' edicts (127). Upfield's depiction of a pastoralist family's attempt to write themselves out of the colonial narrative supported Souter's suggestion that some settlers made concerted attempts to render themselves ideologically palatable and lighten their psychological burden (20). The irony was that the sanctimonious landowners gained more than the Aborigines living on the station.

Upfield's novel displayed the level of self-deception involved in the actions of some well-meaning Australians who believed they were acting in the best interests of Aborigines by imposing strict controls. The Gordons claimed that they afforded their Aboriginal workforce a level of independence, yet the pastoralists restricted their movements and ability to engage with the local community. This was achieved by the Gordons' refusal to employ white people on the station or to allow Aborigines to travel beyond its borders. The rationale behind the Gordon's policy of segregation and containment was that any interaction between black and white would likely result in Aborigines being assaulted or abused (127). The great benefit this situation afforded the land owners was the provision of a stable and exclusive labour source that cost less in monetary terms than an equivalent white workforce. This situation was not unusual as Thalia Anthony noted that pastoralists in remote central and northern Australia were able to bypass government policy to benefit from the labour provided by Aborigines, who in turn were allowed to continue practicing their customs and ceremonies. A major disadvantage of this feudal system was it often ensured that Aborigines lived in an impoverished state (35). Upfield reflected this sad truth in *The Bone is Pointed*.

The fine line between beneficence and exploitation was evident in the payment system adopted by the self-righteous land owners. Gordon refused to make cash payments to his Aboriginal workers. Instead, wages were deposited into a bank account that could only be accessed by the Gordons (128). This measure was employed to prevent Aboriginal workers from participating in the cash economy and to encourage, or indeed to force, them to adhere to a “traditional” lifestyle. The Aboriginal workers were coerced into a life of isolation and poverty because they could not travel or buy services and goods.

The situation was compounded by the Gordon’s provision of meagre supplies to the Aboriginal community. Rations of meat and flour were only provided if the Gordons deemed it necessary during periods when sources of bush tukka were few (127). The labour force were not provided with the option of western-styled housing, a nutritious diet or educational opportunities. Instead, they were placed in an untenable position; if they wanted to live on the land occupied by their ancestors they must adopt a subservient and subsistent lifestyle. Stuart Macintyre suggests that many Aborigines in this situation responded by adopting accommodation strategies (61). Thalia Anthony agrees, claiming that some Aboriginal station workers benefited by acquiring control over the land in the course of their duties (36). By drawing attention to the pastoral industry’s transgression of assimilation policies (35), *The Bone is Pointed* engaged with a difficult political issue. Upfield’s willingness to explore the shifting interdependency between black and white on pastoral enterprises, ensured that his novel contributed to a body of 1930s fiction that politicised the pioneer experience without writing Aborigines out of the nation’s historical narrative (Goldsworthy 111).

*The Bone is Pointed* drew attention to the ability of protectionist measures to disenfranchise and disadvantage Aboriginal people. While some white characters believed that the measures adopted by the Gordons classified their Aboriginal workers as “favoured” (32), the mere presence of Upfield’s detective identified the notion as absurd. Bony’s level of education and his attainment of an influential position in Australian society placed him at odds with the image of the ideal Aboriginal man that was perpetuated by the Gordons. By highlighting the manifest injustices and paradoxes in the pastoral industry the novel illustrated Richard Nile’s claim that writing could question the dominant view that Australians were “a pretty good mob, down to earth and easy going, once you get to know our ways and idiosyncrasies” (“Introduction” 7). Upfield presented a disconcerting vision of the assumption that white Australians knew what was best for the Indigenous community. Bony’s educational and vocational success suggested that Aborigines could be given the opportunity to enter fully into Australian society. The Gordons’ failure to recognise the talents and abilities of Aborigines was accentuated by their close contact with an Aboriginal man who, like Bony, lived successfully in both white and Aboriginal society.

An Aboriginal character called Jimmy Partner lived halfway, literally and figuratively, between the white and black spheres on the Gordons’ station. He was the only member of the Aboriginal workforce who did not live in the Aboriginal camp. Instead, he was given accommodation in the empty white men’s quarters and moved comfortably between the station’s black and white communities. This occurred because Partner had been raised as the companion to Gordon, an only child (7). Although the Gordons espoused the belief that Aborigines should not integrate into white society, they brought an Aboriginal child into their household

when it directly benefitted their family. The Gordons' selective adaptation of their views concerning what was best for Aborigines was hypocritical and self-serving, and was reflective of the paternalistic nature of the period's efforts to protect what was viewed as a primitive race (Macintyre 188).

It might be supposed that Partner's intelligence and his successful adoption of Western culture would lead the Gordons to consider whether other members of the Aboriginal group might achieve a similar result if extended the same opportunities, but this did not occur. The Gordons viewed Partner as an anomaly rather than a positive example others could emulate. This was evident when Gordon's mother looked into Partner's room and expressed surprise at finding "the interior of this room smelled clean despite the fact that its tenant was an aboriginal. But then Jimmy Partner was an unusual aboriginal" (5). While Partner had been afforded a lifestyle and level of independence that was not available to other Aborigines who lived and worked on the station, Upfield unsettled the Gordons' sense of superiority via his depiction of Aboriginal Elders as eminently capable of asserting their independence and taking control of events. Aboriginal characters might initially appear as powerless and submissive but their agency and ingenuity subverted the Gordons' power base. The interdependence of black and white in Upfield's novel reflects a recurrent theme in recently collected Aboriginal stories concerning the pastoral industry, which claim in many instances that Aboriginal men and women involved in large northern cattle enterprises "managed both the land and the stockowners as well as the stock" (Macintyre 105). By focusing on large stations owned by powerful white characters and the seemingly powerless Aborigines in their employ, Upfield examined racial paradoxes seldom acknowledged in the period's historiography.



Upfield offset the attempts of landowners to control their Aboriginal workers in *The Bone is Pointed* by allocating Partner and the Elders a central role in Bony's investigation into the disappearance and suspected murder of a violent white stockman from a neighbouring station. At the novel's conclusion Bony revealed that events had been driven by Partner's attempts to protect Gordon. Partner attempted to prevent the indomitable detective from solving the case of the stockman's disappearance in order to conceal the fact that he had accidentally killed the stockman while saving a defenceless Gordon from a vicious assault (250; 260). After the attacker's death Gordon had insisted the body be hidden to avoid attracting the attention of government officials who might charge Partner with murder and remove the Aboriginal group to a reserve (251). The stockman's body was hidden and the secret was kept until Partner recognised Bony was close to uncovering the truth. He consulted the Elders and it was decided that Bony must be killed (258). The Elders "pointed the bone" at the detective who quickly became dangerously ill. Bony was close to death when Gordon discovered the plan and saved Bony's life by insisting the Elders desist.

Gordon was so affronted that Aborigines had taken a course of action without seeking his approval that he violently struck out at his protectors (258; 259). Although he later felt remorse for assaulting the Aborigines the apology he gave was qualified and reinforced his position as the most powerful man on the station: "Me sorry feller I hittem you. You good feller black-fellers. You my fathers and my brothers, but me I'm Johnny Boss" (261). Despite Gordon's attempts to control the Aborigines who lived on his property, he was protected by an Aborigine for a third time when Bony decided not to report the true nature of the stockman's death and disappearance. Bony believed that the application of white

justice would do more harm than good in this instance so he applied his own version (277). Upfield's depiction of shifting power relationships highlighted the discomfort of those who found themselves at the mercy of, or beholden to, Aborigines.

Mid-twentieth-century Aborigines were an integral component of pastoral enterprises yet their contributions typically received little recognition. Charles D. Rowley wrote of the constant struggle mid-twentieth-century Aborigines endured to gain a measure of acceptance by white society. He concluded that:

Only an unusually determined person can spend a whole lifetime trying hard for acceptance by people whose unthinking insult he fears; and it can be a lonely road through the dull regions of the stolid Australian middle classes. (137)

*The Bone is Pointed* highlighted the many layers of discrimination Aboriginal people had to overcome in the mid-twentieth century in order to gain acceptance in white society. Rowley's belief that Aboriginal people were subject to a "special barrier of prejudice" (156), was evident when Bony was introduced as a detective-inspector to a self-assured young white female character. The woman's response to the introduction was one of incredulity: "'Inspector—of what?' Inquired the girl, her voice clear and her eyes critical" (63).

The constant struggle Bony endured to maintain his position was evident when he succumbed to a quiet moment of self-pity after spending time in the company of a vibrant young white man, to whom all the opportunities afforded by white society were automatically available by nature of his birth: "As Bony walked back to his fire depression sat upon him, and, spiritually, he cried aloud against the fate that had made him what he was and not as the young airman to whom life was

a living joy” (189). The novel reflected Rowley’s suggestion that most “success stories of Aborigines are of bitter struggles to be regarded as honest and sober folk; of battles to meet the ethnocentric criticisms from the Australian middle class; to be regarded as ‘respectable’ in spite of one’s skin coloration” (137). Upfield’s advocacy for an improvement in the opportunities afforded to Aboriginal people was clear in Bony’s sarcastic statement that: “In this country colour is no bar to a keen man’s progress providing that he has twice the ability of his rivals” (52). The desire to challenge dominant racial ideology and social norms that forced Aborigines to live on the fringes of white society was present in other Bony novels.

### ***Bushranger of the Skies***

The primary focus of Upfield’s fiction was to entertain but the provision of a discomfiting picture of racial paradoxes prompted the reader to re-imagine the racial landscape. This nuance has been missed by literary criticism that fails to embed Upfield’s writing in its social and historical context. Stephen Knight’s application of modern sensibilities to Upfield’s writing is evident in his claim that a modern and multicultural nation would classify the Bony series as condescending and naive (*Crime Fiction* 104). Yet it must be recognised that Upfield was writing during a period dominated by policies of racial exclusion. The racial ambivalence of the era was on full display in Upfield’s novels and continues to lend his writing to criticism. The first Bony novel *The Barrakee Mystery* (1929) is referenced most often by those who argue that Upfield dealt with race, and miscegenation in particular, in a one-dimensional manner.

The dramatic conclusion of *The Barrakee Mystery* supports claims that Upfield adhered to racist and paternalistic views via the revelation that the son and

heir to a large station on the Darling River was the adopted son of the station's white cook and an Aboriginal man. The disclosure provided what appeared to be the only plausible explanation for the heir's rejection of his fiancé and growing infatuation with an Aboriginal woman (314). His family accepted the devastated young man's self-imposed exile as a sad but socially acceptable solution to the spectre of miscegenation.

Goldsworthy's nuanced examination of *The Barrakee Mystery* delves beyond the melodramatic plot that reflected the period's anxieties concerning sexual contact between the races. She argues that Upfield's depiction of a white woman's sexual desire for an Aboriginal man was so unusual for the period that she wondered whether "Upfield may have been the first Australian writer to reverse the usual form of inter-racial sexuality" (125). As Upfield's writing matured his exploration of miscegenation became multifaceted. His depiction of race in *Bushranger of the Skies* supports Goldsworthy's claim that a complex, sympathetic and disquieting attitude to Aboriginality was woven throughout Australian fiction since the 1920s (123).

*Bushranger of the Skies* and *The Bone is Pointed* present major characters who became familiar with Aboriginal culture at a young age. In both novels the main protagonist's parents chose a local Aboriginal boy to be raised as their son's companion. In *Bushranger of the Skies* Donald McPherson's life became entwined with Burning Water,<sup>3</sup> an Aborigine who eventually became the Elder of the Indigenous group that resided on McPherson's station. The relationship between the pair was described as one based on equality and cultural reciprocity (66). McPherson developed an intimate understanding of and great respect for

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<sup>3</sup> This is a strange name for an Aboriginal character but it was probably designed to appeal to American readers.

Indigenous culture. He acknowledged the intelligence of Aborigines: “What the tutors taught me I handed on to Burning Water. What I did, he had to do. My father took a great liking to him, and eventually he lived here as one of the family” (66). The sense of brotherhood was accentuated by McPherson’s marriage to his companion’s sister Tarlalin.

Despite the fondness of McPherson’s parents for Burning Water their views regarding their son’s choice in wife reflected the period’s dominant views concerning miscegenation. McPherson told Bony that his mother “was shocked, and then indignant, but my father didn’t raise a rumpus. He said the boy must have his fling, and that later on I would marry a white woman and settle down and have an heir to carry on the line” (104). Although McPherson was denied parental permission to wed the undeterred couple were married according to Aboriginal law and lived happily for several years in a home that was physically isolated from both racial groups. After the birth of their son Upfield’s progressive depiction of a happy mixed-race marriage faltered because the death of Tarlalin followed soon after.

Tarlalin’s death can be viewed as a romantic tragedy or the only palatable outcome due to the inability of a nation preoccupied with racial purity to accept miscegenation (Strauss 124). With the passage of time McPherson reflected on the marriage and made it clear that his love for his Aboriginal wife was qualified on racial grounds. He described Tarlalin as good looking *for* an Aborigine and suggested that the union was the direct consequence of his isolated upbringing, claiming that “it might have all been otherwise had I known white women” (104). The scenario demonstrated the willingness of white Australians to accept and disavow a black presence concurrently (Ross 46).

Although McPherson built and nurtured a beautiful memorial garden dedicated to Tarlalin there was an underlying sense of relief that his Aboriginal wife was safely relegated to the past. Would Tarlalin have been so revered by this cantankerous and dictatorial pastoralist if she had lived a long life? The probable answer was, no. As a result *Bushranger of the Skies* facilitated an examination of the concurrent sense of attraction and repulsion between the races, and supports Elder's claim that a deep undercurrent of anxiety and ambivalence concerning miscegenation dominated the assimilation era (*Dreams and Nightmares* 233).

Although the many problems McPherson may have faced due to the presence of an Aboriginal wife were neatly avoided by her death, the couple's child proved to be a constant and troubling presence to his father. Racial tensions on the station were immediately heightened after Rex's birth. The first impulse of the white grandparents typified the views of the assimilation era; they attempted to remove the child from its parents so he could be raised by a white family and assimilated into white society (Macintyre 227). Tarlalin's refusal to be separated from her son received her husband's support, yet after her death McPherson acquiesced to his parent's demands and gave them full control (106). The grandparents lavished the boy with the money, possessions and educational opportunities they had withheld from their son. Rex was sent to a boarding school where he matured into a handsome, urbane and confident young man. After his grandparents' death he also enjoyed the benefit of financial security (106; 107). It might seem that this character would emulate Bony's success, however, Rex's reaction to consistent racial prejudice and social exclusion contrasted sharply with Bony's.

Despite possessing the intelligence and financial means to create a successful life in mainstream society, Rex returned to the family station a discontented young man whose thoughts soon turned to conquest and domination. After failing to convince his father to make him a gift of the station Rex embarked on a campaign of terror designed to force his father to acquiesce to his demands. Rex formed a personal Aboriginal army and caused mayhem by stealing cattle, murdering stockmen, dropping bombs on the homestead and kidnapping his young white cousin who was much loved by McPherson. These actions might suggest that it was impossible to eliminate an Aborigine's savage impulses but the narrative presented an alternate view.

The impetus behind Rex's attempt to wrest control of the family property was an unrelenting sense of bitterness caused by unassailable barriers of discrimination and prejudice, that were maintained by those who refused to afford him equal status. When Bony expressed his incredulity that Rex was not content to embrace the opportunities afforded by his education and inheritance the angry young man retorted: "Money can't make our skins white, can it? Money can't even prevent us being insulted, regarded either as dangerous animals or pet poodles. You know that. You must know it. We can't mix on equality with white people. They won't let us" (406). Bony certainly did understand Rex's position. Earlier in the novel the detective acknowledged the obstacles he overcame to establish his own career: "I was not raised to my present rank through political or social influence. My birth was a serious bar, and, to achieve eminence in my profession, I had to prove myself not only worthy of it, but doubly so" (91). While Rex reacted with burning anger towards the injustices he endured, Bony's reaction was a quiet determination. Bony encouraged Rex to continue striving to achieve his goals:

People who try to insult me because of my birth never hurt me ... I am always interested by the unfortunate people who suffer from the inferiority complex which they so clearly reveal by using insulting words and by being snobbish. Far from being hurt, I am always pleased because it is an acknowledgment of my superiority to them. (406)

The attempt to influence Rex failed, yet the characters' contrasting reactions to ingrained racism and social exclusion demonstrated Upfield's empathy for those who were marginalised on the basis of their racial heritage.

*Bushranger of the Skies* was critical of a society that excluded those it unfairly designated as inferior, for example it claimed that "the aborigines had been debased, outraged, jibed at and made the butt of both coarse and refined wit. They had been drawn into the shadow of a civilisation which, compared with theirs, was a riot of criminal lunacy" (171). Rex railed against the hypocrisy of a society that demanded that his social status would always be provisional on the sole basis of race:

When I first went to school and they knew I had money to burn, my school mates crowded me like the born spongers they were. I was invited to their homes, but if I smiled at their sisters the girls would vanish. Behind my back they called me the nigger. I was worse off than if I'd been a full-blood. (407)

Upfield's desire to unsettle dominant racial ideology was also evident in "Beyond the Mirage" where he stated he was

convinced that the white man's crime against the blacks was not and is not their wholesale reduction in numbers but his refusal to give them a chance



of competing for a civilized livelihood and life's prizes. The crime is all the more greater against the half-castes. (190)

The suggestion that a serious crime was being committed against Aborigines accentuated the dire consequences of racial injustice. In *Bushranger of the Skies* Rex sought retribution for personal sufferings instigated by exclusionary social practices.

Rex blamed his father for his inferior social position, claiming that “for what I am he is to blame. I hate him. I’ve hated him ever since that day I really saw myself for the first time. A fellow called me a dirty half-caste ... I wasn’t dirty, but I was a half-caste. I hated myself that day” (407). The contested nature of Australian race relations was exposed by Upfield’s depiction of the unabated and mutual loathing between McPherson and Rex that could only be resolved by the death of one of the men. McPherson declared that his son must die because he was a human stain, devil and monster who was not worthy to be a descendant of his Scottish ancestors (111). In turn, the son declared himself to be a literal reflection of his name, stating that he would prevail in his conquest because “I am like all the great kings” (404). At the novel’s dramatic climax, the battle between the two men was resolved in accordance with the demands of dominant racial ideology— Rex’s death ensured that racial tensions were eradicated and McPherson’s control of the station was assured. The conflict placed a focus on the confluence of contradictions and complexities that impeded a marked improvement in the disenfranchised status of Aborigines. *Bushranger of the Skies* portrayed the distance that separated black and white as a shifting and contested space, and highlighted unresolved settler tensions centred around issues of belonging.

Upfield's examination of the relationship between the coloniser and colonised encouraged the reader to consider whether the social and vocational opportunities afforded to Aborigines should be improved. He also raised the unresolved spectre of belonging and Indigenous land rights and foreshadowed the anger and resentment that continues to surround the issue. The reader was not simply entertained by the provision of a neatly constructed detective story, they were challenged to confront unsettling social issues and consider alternative visions of settler society. Victoria Stewart's examination of 1940s British writing claims that crime fiction encouraged readers to sift through the narrative and identify concealed but relevant pieces of information (59). This suggests that Upfield's war-time readers were capable of recognising and assessing the incongruities he presented in Australia's race relations.

### ***Cake in the Hat Box***

Upfield's Bony novels presented a wide range of Aboriginal characters. Many were powerless minor characters who occupied inconsequential positions on the fringe of the story. Others including Bony, Rex McPherson, Burning Water and Jimmy Partner drove events and unsettled the view that outback Australia was the white man's domain (Strauss 120). Bony was ascribed the most agency in each novel as his position as detective-inspector gave him the power to dictate terms and decide the fate of others. He was also willing to disregard the authority of his police superiors (*The Bone is Pointed* 145; *Mr Jelly's Business* 191) and apply his own considered sense of justice (*The Barrakee Mystery* 291; *The Bone is Pointed* 277; *Bony and the White Savage* 191).

Why did Upfield develop an Aboriginal character who enjoyed freedom and powers not extended to those in the wider community? Milnor's sympathetic examination of the crime series refutes suggestions that the main protagonist's racial heritage was simply a means of ensuring the series had a strong point of difference with its competitors (130). Janeen Web and Andrew Enstice agree as they claim Upfield's Bony novels were largely motivated by a desire to positively represent Aboriginal people (249). The level of social commentary contained in *The Bone is Pointed* and *Bushranger of the Skies* supports these views. Upfield's crime novels not only sought to entertain the reader, they resisted dominant racial ideology by presenting Aboriginal people as a visible and integral component of outback Australian society. His writing lamented that too few were willing to envisage a society that offered Aborigines an opportunity to leave the social margins. *Cake in the Hat Box* outlined the failure of Australian society to effect a marked improvement in the opportunities afforded to Aborigines.

In contrast to *The Bone is Pointed* and *Bushranger of the Skies*, Bony was the only Aboriginal character in *Cake in the Hat Box* whose personality was fully developed or who was able to engage on equal terms with the white component of a small outback community. Other Aboriginal characters fell into two distinct and disparate groups. The first comprised of a small community of Aborigines who chose to live in almost complete isolation from white society. These people were referred to as the Musgrave Aborigines. They adhered to pre-white settlement lifestyles and cultural expressions, and displayed a level of contempt and disregard for white society and its laws.

The second group consisted of a powerless and disenfranchised Aboriginal workforce situated on a large pastoral enterprise. They were subordinate in every

sense to their employers—four siblings who had inherited the large station from their pioneering parents. The Breens exuded a strong sense of belief in the notion that the station was their birth right. This view negated any suggestion that their dispossessed workforce whose ancestors had probably lived on that land for thousands of years, had an equal or greater claim on land the Breen's forebears had acquired. The Aboriginal workers were dehumanised by the landowners because they were viewed as possessions or chattels. Kimberley Breen informed Bony that she and her brothers had “mostly been content living here among these mountains where we were born, and with aborigines who belong to us as much as the cattle on our country” (273). In accordance with this opinion Upfield presented the Aborigines in question as generic caricatures rather than distinct characters for whom the reader could develop a sense of empathy. As a consequence the novel reflected on the slow pace of progress in race relations between 1930 and 1960 (Macintyre 228).

It must not be forgotten that a range of Upfield's fiction and non-fiction adopted similarly negative racial stereotypes. His 1948 *Walkabout* article “Walking the Cattle” covered the same subject matter as his first contribution to the magazine. Both recounted in detail the many hardships and privations endured by droving teams who travelled vast distances, but in “Walking the Cattle” Upfield's description of an Aboriginal member of a droving team supported the stereotype that Aboriginal people were inherently lazy. This was presented by Upfield's claim that an Aboriginal member of the group lived by the philosophy that “it is nice to get up in the morning but nicer to stay in bed” (8). It is not suggested that Upfield's sympathetic depictions of the plight of Aborigines counteracted the many accounts that were racist, however, it is argued that Upfield's writing displayed a level of

complexity which facilitates studies of the racial ambiguity that dominated mid-twentieth-century Australia.

The 1980 Boyer Lecture series presented by Bernard Smith shared an image of outback Australia in 1932 that was not dissimilar to the social landscape that Upfield depicted over twenty years later in *Cake in the Hat Box*. Smith stated that aborigines were looked on and used almost as free goods of nature. For such work as they did they were given a little payment in kind, it was a sort of peonage. I do not think there was a single element in the whole system of life—land, food, shelter, jobs, pay, the safety of women and children, even access to and protection by the law—in which they were not at great disadvantage, and without remedy. The dominance of European interests was total, unquestioned, and inexpressibly self-centred. (12)

In the lecture, Smith expressed disappointment in seeing little evidence of any significant change in the circumstances of Aborigines. The hope outlined in *The Bone is Pointed* and *Bushranger of the Skies* that Aboriginal people might be increasingly afforded opportunities to engage with mainstream Australian society are shown in *Cake in the Hatbox* to have been in vain. Australia was depicted as a harsh society where the rules of conquest dictated that all the spoils remained with the victors. The novel supports Anthony's claim that the feudal powerbase of pastoralists allowed them to exercise total control over a dispossessed workforce (37). A minor white character expressed his sympathy for the plight of local Aborigines: "Poor critters ... bloody Orstralia ain't done much for 'em. Still, if I don't eat you you eat me, and that's the way of the world all over" (199). The clearly defined division between black and white in the outback community and on the Breen's station ensured that white landowners maintained a strong power base.

The total acceptance of the Breen's disenfranchised Aboriginal workforce to their subjugation was apparent in Upfield's description of an episode in which a group of Aboriginal women and children clustered around Kimberley Breen as she sat on a blanket and played with three Aboriginal babies:

Around Kimberly and the babies stood several lubras, and twice their number of children and dogs. The women were vastly amused at Kimberley's interest in their babies, and some of the younger children were solemnly jealous. (142)

The desire of the Aboriginal women and children to gain the attention of the woman they venerated emphasised their inferior status. The powerless status of the Indigenous workforce and their inability to act autonomously was revealed when they feared an imminent attack from the Musgrave people. The immediate impulse of the Aborigines was to rush to Kimberley Breen for protection in a panicked and helpless fashion. Their behaviour led Bony to muse that "those blacks at the homestead reminded me of chickens clustered about the mother hen when a hawk is approaching" (158). The episode reflected the weak and dependant status of many Aborigines involved in the pastoral industry during the period (Prentis 145), yet this vision was offset by Upfield's depiction of the Musgrave people who openly rejected white society and refused to acquiesce to its dictates.

The Musgrave Aborigines were portrayed as fiercely independent, virile and strong. Most members of the group refused to adopt western lifestyles, choosing instead to live a self-contained existence outside white society. Rather than seek the attention and approval of a society that often returned such overtures with derision and condescension, the majority of the Musgrave people treated white society with disdain and disregarded the sovereignty of white law. These

views were most evident when a white policeman was found murdered and the location of his Musgrave tracker could not be determined. The inclination of the first white man on the scene was to assume that the Aboriginal tracker committed the murder and fled the scene. No-one was concerned for the missing tracker's welfare (27). In contrast, Bony's impartiality enabled him to establish what the Musgrave people had already discovered by spiritual means—the tracker had also been murdered and his body was buried so he might take the blame for the policeman's death. The novel raced to a thrilling conclusion as Bony attempted to uncover the identity of the murderers before the Musgrave people killed them. This provided Upfield with the opportunity to depict a level of veracity in Aboriginal customs that were widely dismissed.

*Cake in the Hatbox* contrasted Bony's reliance on forensics and his powers of observation with the methods employed by the Musgrave people to identify the identity of murderers. Although Aboriginal methods of detecting crimes were often disparaged, Upfield's novel suggested these practices should be treated with a greater level of respect. The method of detection adopted by the Musgrave people involved building a woven platform on which the body of the murdered tracker was placed:

Under the platform they built a pavement of flat stones, and on each stone was marked the name of a man who could have killed Jacky Musgrave.

Until the murderer was executed the spirit of the dead man would know no rest ... it would hover about the body it had inhabited, and blow the drops of grease falling from it to the stone marked with the name of the murderer.

Fantastic—or was it? (247)

The scene was reminiscent of a 1935 photo and explanatory letter sent by Idriess to *Walkabout* which depicted the same method for detecting those responsible for causing harm (Letter 64). As the letter was published on the same page as a short biography of Upfield, who was known to collect published reviews and articles referring to his writing in scrapbooks (a number are held by the Baillieu Library), it seems probable that Upfield had read Idriess' anecdote and used this as the basis for this episode in *Cake in the Hatbox*. Both writers were advocates for an increase in the level of respect afforded to aspects of Aboriginal spirituality. Upfield wrote that "only fools laugh at what their puny brains cannot accept ... and even wise men are too apt to sneer at things they cannot see and touch and measure and weigh" (*Cake in the Hatbox* 169). This view was also present in *The Bone is Pointed* as it depicted the ability of Aboriginal Elders to "bone" a person and successfully will them to die. Upfield's empathy for those affected by widespread Aboriginal disadvantage was accentuated by the measure of respect that his novels afforded to Indigenous culture.

In *Cake in the Hatbox* Upfield suggested that Aboriginal methods of deduction had proved largely effective for thousands of years (247). The sense of superiority enjoyed by many white readers was challenged:

Modern society fights a killer with scientific aids in the hands of experts, and primitive men still depend on natural phenomena and methods of detection which appear ridiculously chancy. Primitive men must often err, resulting in the innocent being executed; but, strangely enough, the complex machinery of civilised justice, assisted by science, has also been known to execute a man for a crime he did not commit. (246)



Bony's knowledge of and belief in Aboriginal customs and practices ensured that he was careful not to interfere in the attempts of the Musgrave people to exact their retribution on the tracker's murderers. Aware that this group would not hesitate to kill any who stood in their way, Bony was not willing to place himself in danger to save the life of the men whom the Musgrave Elders had identified as killers. Instead, Bony watched in awe the unstoppable "exhibition of primitive justice, which nothing could divert from its unerring course" (255). The Musgrave Aborigines are the antithesis of the Breen's defenceless and submissive Aboriginal workforce. The independent Musgrave group did not submit themselves to the protection of others, they proactively pursued their own course of action.

The novel's veneration of pre-white contact Aboriginal society negatively critiqued the degradation of Aboriginal society, but it did more than reflect contemporary social problems. Carol Hetherington described Upfield's novels as "foils for the social, national and racial issues they expose" ("Introduction" xv). They encouraged readers to probe and question their views concerning race and to distinguish truth from conjecture. This endeavour was also apparent in *Man of Two Tribes* (1956) where Bony suggested the "real" Australia put on a disguise that was easily overlooked by the urban population (182). Upfield's attempt to address racial ignorance was revealed in his correspondence with friend E. Verco Whyte, where he outlined his ambition "to create an Australian fiction which, while pandering to the public demand for thrills will also imprint on the mind of the reader indelible pictures of this country" (Letter to E. Verco Whyte April 1930). The pictures Upfield valued were those that revered non-urban communities and demonstrated a willingness to afford Aboriginal people a greater opportunity to contribute to Australian society.

In 1959 Alan Trengove questioned whether Upfield's success overseas had "given us an international reputation for fair play to the black man to which, perhaps, we're not entitled. Could a half-caste aboriginal rise to the rank of detective inspector in the police force?" ("Bony' Tosses Us a Clue" 6). The scenario was certainly not probable but Upfield's writing refused to blindly accept the continued organisation of Australian society according to a strict and exclusionary hierarchy of race. This was a bold step to take as a *Daily Telegraph* reviewer of *Mr Jelly's Business* (1937) demonstrated the entrenched nature of racial discrimination:

I refuse to believe that any plummy half-caste aborigine would ever talk like a S.M.H. leader writer ... it is a pity, because Mr. Upfield could have made something real and enduring out of a half-caste abo. detective—if he had first made him a half-caste abo. ("Dr Watson Jnr" 6)

Did the reviewer refuse to conceptualise the existence of an intelligent and suave police detective with a mixed racial heritage because this would concede that Aborigines could break the restrictive mould assigned to them? Racist attitudes based on similarly erroneous assumptions were frequently depicted in Upfield's novels.

The presence of a handsome, charming and confident mixed-race detective-inspector was often met with a mixture of disbelief, shock and general disquiet by characters who failed to reconcile Bony's occupation with his racial heritage. When Bony attempted to take lodgings at a small boarding house in *Mr Jelly's Business* the reaction of the white female manager was open distrust: "Into her eyes flashed suspicion at sight of the half-caste, at which he was amused, as he always was when the almost universal distrust of his colour was raised in the minds of

white women” (18). A Bony novel published twenty years later demonstrated the pervasive belief in the inferiority of Aboriginal people. In *Bony Buys a Woman* (1957) a white cattleman was incredulous that a man with Bony’s racial heritage could achieve a position of detective-inspector (29). While Bony’s position within the police force ensured that he gained access to sections of white society not open to other Aborigines, it was the force of his magnetic personality and his unrivalled skills of detection that assuaged the anxiety of characters who usually maintained a physical and social distance between the races. Upfield’s novels re-imagined the racial segregation of Australian society in a non-threatening manner.

The ability of crime writing to challenge accepted social norms has been recognised by critics. Murray S. Martin stated that “most modern detective stories offer far more than the solution to a crime. In fact their settings, and their examinations of motives and personalities, offer a view of the societies in which the detectives work” (100). Upfield’s writing challenged the continued social exclusion of Aborigines and suggested that Australian society would be enriched by the contributions of Indigenous culture and people. A *Sun News Pictorial* review of *The Bone is Pointed* illustrated that some were receptive to Upfield’s views:

Upfield has no patience with those who picture the aboriginal as a half-witted savage, suited only to illustrate comic strips, and one reason for introducing in this novel the half-caste detective, Napoleon Bonaparte, is to let that figure prove again that aboriginal blood and brains are equal to those of the white man. (“The Bone is Pointed” 42)

Upfield’s consistent attempts to address a long and unresolved history of racial conflict and segregation supported Knight’s claim that Australian crime writing

could be strongly “in tune with the origins of white Australia” (“The Case of the Missing Genre” 247). At the very least Upfield’s fascination with outback communities revealed a measure of disappointment that Australian society showed little resolve to afford Aboriginal people the opportunity to enrich the national story.

Upfield’s focus on outback communities and stereotypes provided urban readers with entertaining stories which provided a respite from familiar scenes and routines. His writing also provided the opportunity to acknowledge the difficult realities faced by Indigenous Australians and to consider what the social landscape might look like if it was unencumbered by racial conflict. This challenge encouraged readers to uncover the “real” Australia. An example is found in the twelfth article in Upfield’s newspaper series “The Real Australia” where he acknowledged visions of the “good old days” were usually illusions (12). Upfield’s willingness to subvert traditional power relationships and confront tensions generated by the dispossession and marginalisation of Aborigines unsettled dominant historiography. As a result it is evident that middlebrow writing was capable of critically examining Australian society and challenging the readers’ sense of nation.

## Chapter Four

### Ernestine Hill: “The Ghost of the Old, the Chaos of the New”

Ernestine Hill (1899-72) was a prolific writer who was well-known for making numerous journeys throughout remote regions of northern and central Australia. A review of *The Great Australian Loneliness* (1937) by Broken Hill’s *Barrier Miner* described her as an intrepid traveller who journeyed “where no white woman ever before penetrated, and where few white men have gone” (“The Great Australian Loneliness” 3). Hill’s travel exploits were vividly brought to life in an oeuvre that shared similarities with fellow writers Ion Idriess and Arthur W. Upfield. All three were seasoned travellers and raconteurs who produced melodramatic accounts of life in remote Australia that were designed to pique the interest of urban readers.

The first two of Hill’s six books were published in 1937. *The Great Australian Loneliness* is a descriptive travel writing text that extolled the endeavours and achievements of small white populations living in remote and harsh conditions. *Water Into Gold* (1937) focused on the people and industries based alongside the Murray River and lauded the achievements of settler communities in regional Australia. Both exhibit Hill’s long held tendency to depict a bright and prosperous future for the nation (Haynes 151), and to foreground episodes of settler history that she believed were in danger of being forgotten. Both inclinations form the impetus behind Hill’s only novel *My Love Must Wait* (1941), a publishing success that has largely ignored by critics and researchers. The historical romance was republished in 2013 by Angus and Robertson as part of their Australian Classics series.

Hill's novel presents a fictional biography of British naval captain and coastal surveyor Matthew Flinders (1774-1814). At the time of the novel's publication Flinders' role in mapping the southern continent had not been well recognised in Australia or Britain. The novel's afterword outlined Hill's desire for the book to play a role in rehabilitating the reputation of the "last of the great navigators of the unknown, the man who mapped, and named, the fifth continent" (453). The writer achieved her goal. Miles Franklin claimed the novel's success was due to the mix of Flinders' achievements and Hill's romantic and emotional "power in presentation" (211). The biography certainly showcased Hill's dramatic writing style which a reviewer of *The Great Australian Loneliness* had earlier described as racy, enthusiastic and humorously pictorial ("New Book on Australia by Ernestine Hill" 22).

Hill's entertaining and uncomplicated travel writing was recognisable and popular with readers (Morris 167). Her ability to depict both desolate and idyllic locations as attractive travel destinations ensured she was well-suited to writing Australian travel promotions. It was not surprising, therefore, that Hill was chosen by Sidney Ure Smith to contribute the text to his picturesque coffee table-styled book *Australia, Land of Contrasts* (1943). Hill's prose unashamedly promoted a nation described as "one of the most progressive countries in the world." Positivity concerning Australia's untapped development potential was also evident in Hill's second biographical book *Flying Doctor Calling* (1947) which outlined the legendary work of Dr John Flynn (1880-1951). The biography praised the manner in which Flynn and his ground-breaking Aerial Medical Service reduced the suffering of remote populations and facilitated the future development of inland Australia: "In this second century there is a great colonization before us—the

Northern Territory, the Centre, and the West, where many thousands of people will be following to make their own of a vacant and glorious land” (135). The popularity of Flynn’s story had already been proven by Idriess’ bestseller *Flynn of the Inland* (1932). The success of Hill’s version demonstrated the willingness of urban readers to connect with a way of life enjoyed by a minor section of the population.

The continued interest of mid-twentieth-century readers in outback Australia was especially evident in the success of Hill’s colourful social history of the Northern Territory. *The Territory* (1951) clearly demonstrated the writer’s dual endeavours: to promote the development potential of non-urban Australia and to document the outback lifestyles and histories that were disappearing due to urbanisation and technological advances. In the posthumously published *Kabbarli* (1973), a memoir recounting Hill’s interactions with the infamous outback identity Daisy Bates, Hill claims that she undertook a “desert odyssey to find the last of the first, the forgotten pioneers. I wanted to see their lives, to hear their stories, and to keep their memories” (92). Hill’s admiration for larger than life outback characters, remote landscapes and settler history was the primary focus of much of her readily accessible fiction and non-fiction.

Although Hill published fewer books than Idriess and Upfield the numerous re-printings of her texts, her public profile and prolific contributions to a wide range of magazines and newspapers including *Walkabout*, *Smith’s Weekly*, *ABC Weekly* and South Australia’s *Advertiser*, led Meaghan Morris to conclude that for thirty years Hill “was one of Australia’s best-known and widely-read authors” (167). While Hill is now an unfashionable literary figure whose writing is dismissed as the nostalgic and sentimental glorification of settler Australia, this

chapter argues that a range of her fiction and non-fiction exhibited a nuanced engagement with postcolonial anxieties concerning the nation's identity. A level of complexity within Hill's writing was recently identified by Adam Gall who claims that "there is space in her text for multiple readings, and it would perhaps be mistaken to suggest that the connections were lost on her" (201). A dual purpose is evident in *My Love Must Wait*, which not only examined a period of settler history, but also provided a positive image of post-war reconstruction. It inferred that when the chaos of World War II had passed Australians might once again design and effect a prosperous future.

Hill's fiction and non-fiction looked forward and back, refusing to forget the past while depicting a bright future for the nation. She was not alone in this endeavour. David Carter's examination of literary nationalism identifies an alternating pessimism for what had been lost or ignored, and a sense of optimism that a distinctive culture and national character persisted ("Critics, Writers, Intellectuals" 267). Hill's writing did more, however, than simplistically laud past achievements and promote the nation's future potential. This chapter's examination of Hill's novel and a selection of her numerous *Walkabout* articles reveals that middlebrow writing was capable of a nuanced engagement with nation. Unsophisticated writing skills and a veneration of settler history did not render the writer incapable of contributing to a modern and nationalist dialogue. As Hill's oeuvre has not been subject to the same level of study as the period's literary writers this complexity has been overlooked but is worthy of further examination.



### **The travel writer's prosperous national vision**

Hill's vivid writing style drew the mid-twentieth-century reader's attention away from urban preoccupations. It appealed to those who sought an entertaining literary respite from the difficulties or mundane realities of life, yet it also offered a serious commentary on complex issues. Hill's *Walkabout* articles concerning her personal travels provided effusive descriptions of regions of untold beauty and dramatic histories, but they also suggested that remote landscapes could be successfully developed and the size of isolated communities could be greatly expanded. Her claims that the development of regional areas would assist in the development of a modern and prosperous nation supports Carter's identification of a shared belief in the period's book culture that "an authentic tradition had been founded in outback or pastoral Australia and that this remained the truest source of nation-building values" ("Modernity" 139). Rather than classifying central Australia as a barren or dead landscape, Hill saw great tourism and other business potential.

Her 1935 *Walkabout* article "Mining Mica in Central Australia" described the mica mining region east of Alice Springs as bursting with a profusion of beryl, quartzite, rubies, chalcedony and crystals. She claimed that travel through this landscape rendered her "wide-eyed at its magical beauty" (37). The article designated the region as ripe for further development by mining and tourism interests. Hill's support for the domestic tourism industry was evident in a range of her *Walkabout* articles. "Glory Of The Islands" (1935), published during a period in which many struggled with the legacy of the Depression, was effusive in its description of the natural splendour of the north-west Australian coast.

The region was depicted as offering the traveller a "paradise of hundreds, thousands, of coral isles and islets mirrored in dreamy seas, archipelagos of glory,

which, for their breath-taking loveliness and colour, surpass all others of the Australian coast” (36). In the article Hill self-consciously suggested that a series of objective and meticulous observations had led to her considered use of the term “paradise.” Hill claimed that “I use the superlative advisedly, after two or three journeys round the continent in little ships and big” (36). The defence of her superfluous language demonstrated the care Hill took care to bolster her renown as a seasoned traveller and to generate an air of authority. Her success in this endeavour is displayed by a promotional article in Perth’s *Western Mail* which claimed that

at all times she goes to endless trouble to ensure the accuracy of her statements, and after her trips spends long periods in the various libraries to get the authentic background for her historical works. Mrs. Hill is optimistic about Australia’s future but she considers it essential that books, articles and stories written about the country should present a clear picture to the reader. (“Travels in Australia” 36)

Hill was certainly a well-informed and adept traveller who was willing to see splendour and wonder where many did not.

In 1936 Darwin’s residences largely comprised of basic and unsophisticated dwellings, however, Hill’s *Walkabout* article “Driving Around Darwin” claimed that the town has “the loveliest and most unusual homes of the Australian continent” (40). Darwin was described as a place of untold tropical beauty as its “fields on either side are greener than English meadows ... Every hollow is a lily-pool, carpeted with waterlilies blue and mauve and pink and white, hovering above them myriads of dragon-flies and birds of bright plumage scarcely larger” (41). A focus on Darwin’s positive attributes supported Hill’s future-focused claim that the

northern outpost could become “a world-famed tourist resort, for, to seeing eyes, its beauty and interest is unique” (40). “Driving Around Darwin” revealed that Hill had the eyes to see the best that the landscape had to offer, and the desire to see non-urban Australia prosper.

Hill’s advocacy for the domestic tourism industry was based on a personal love of Australian travel. In *The Great Australian Loneliness* Hill described feeling compelled to discover the scenes, histories and people which lay beyond the easy reach of travellers. Remote regions that could not be reached by the railway were viewed as offering a “trail of infinite surprises” (7). As a result the time Hill spent in cities was usually focused on earning enough money to fund further travels that were often undertaken with her son Robert. Her 1942 letter to Alice Mackaness, wife of the influential literary figure George Mackaness, claimed that “I only wanted money for two reasons, to make mother’s years very easy and happy, and that Bob and I could be free to travel again and do more together for the far-away that I love” (Letter to Alice Mackaness).

This mindset was also evident in Hill’s 1945 letter to fellow journalist Constance Robertson in which she claimed to be happiest when leaving urban Australia behind:

So far as living goes, the more I travel Australia the more I wonder that Australians of the cities can be so deaf and so blind. After sad and foolish rushing years I have never been so truly happy as since I crossed the Territory border. You should see our hills and valleys, a thousand shades of rich and glittering green and rivers and creeks miles of silver waters. (Letter to Constance Robertson)

This view was repeated in Hill's 1947 manuscript "Australia's Home" where she admitted that "it is always my delight to travel north and west, and although I love the whole Island I travel south and east only so I can go north and west again" (1).

A 1952 letter to George Mackaness contained yet another description of Hill's passion for outback travel. The letter outlined Hill's desire to be away beyond the railway lines with petrol at 5/- a gallon, squandering all the writing makes on buying more miles, those blank and dusty miles ... It is all magnificent country, and every dusty monotony leads to a joyous surprise. While I am still healthy and bright and eager to do it I love to take the trail and nothing, I hope, will be wasted—I'll travel it over in notes and maps and writing to the end of my years. (Letter to George Mackaness 1952)

In fact, Hill's love of touring remote Australia bordered on obsession as she spent the majority of her income on these expeditions. The same letter claimed that:

Once again I have fallen from grace. With my first *Territory* royalties and all I could possibly gather from the kindness of A. and R. in mortgage of the future, alas, I bought a little Dodge utility car, ancient but very true, of iridescent blue, and now, with its beach canopy, gay. Bob at the wheel, Eleanor Smith—a writing friend from Perth—beside me, and our house on our backs, we scampered away.

Hill's strong drive for constant movement was confirmed in *Kabbarli* where she avowed that "above all, I wanted to see and to know my beloved country" (92).

The time that Hill spent wandering throughout remote locations and writing about her experiences was not simply a means of escape or earning an income. In *The Great Australian Loneliness* she claimed that her journeys throughout Australia provided a sense that she "was beginning to know my Australia" (114).

Travel provided Hill with a strong connection to country. This was an experience that she encouraged readers to emulate, so they too might develop a distinct and non-urban sense of place. Her didactic endeavour was shared with *Walkabout's* founding editor: both Hill and Charles Holmes displayed an unyielding desire to inspire urban readers to develop an awareness of and an appreciation for the land and the communities that existed beyond the suburban fringe.

Holmes' travel memoir *We Find Australia* (1932), published two years before *Walkabout* was launched, is a portent of the didactic vision he espoused in the magazine. The English immigrant claimed that he undertook an expedition through "the remote byways of the world's loneliest continent," so he might "learn what thrills lay in those hundreds of thousands of square miles of Australia's more or less uninhabited territory" (11). The suggestion that travel could reveal much to the novice and seasoned Rambler alike was emphasised in the preface contributed by the widely travelled past-Prime Minister Stanley Bruce. After reading Holmes's memoir the statesman claimed that it was apparent that a field of infinite discoveries awaited the reader and vicarious traveller. Bruce admitted that prior to reading the text he believed that the extent of his past journeys had provided him with a thorough understanding of Australia (9), but Holmes' book had shown him that the more one travels the greater the realisation that there was more to learn about such a vast and varied nation. The vicarious and varied experiences offered by *Walkabout* gave the reader an accessible means of gaining exposure to a range of Australian people, industries, flora, fauna and landscapes, however, travel writing was also a means of connecting with the past.

Hill's 1935 *Walkabout* article "Sailing Old Dutch Seas" presented an account of a journey she undertook to the north-west of Western Australia. The

coastal landscape was depicted as steeped in the ghostly voices of long dead Dutch explorers and sailors: “It seemed that, in the murmur of the sea on the reef, we could hear the sound of Dutch voices, low-pitched and continuous, telling over and over the story of treachery and piracy and wholesale murder that is for all time an epic of the sea” (21). In an era in which British and American literature dominated the publishing industry and school syllabi, stories about Australia’s exploration enabled the reader to connect with the past.

Tales of adventurers, travellers and surveyors were widespread. Richard White claimed that “Australians were encouraged, as it were, to see Australia through the eyes of the explorers” (“Travel Writing and Australia” 6). Much of Hill’s writing displayed her longstanding fascination with exploration. Her 1952 letter to Mackaness outlined the joy she experienced following the paths of long dead adventurers: “I often wonder why the following of the explorers, quite apart from writing, is the happiest recreation of my life ” (Letter to George Mackaness 1952). The most overt example of Hill’s engagement with the nation’s rich heritage of European exploration was her historical novel *My Love Must Wait*, which enthusiastically lauded the contribution Flinders made to the development of the Australian colonies during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century.

### ***My Love Must Wait***

A letter sent from Hill to Mackaness revealed that she did not initially intend to write her biography of Flinders in a fictional form. The correspondence outlined Hill’s original intention to produce a standard biographical work on Flinders until Aubrey Cousins from Angus and Robertson persuaded her to present the navigator’s life in a novel. Cousins argued that a novel would effectively “sugar

coat” a little known episode from Australian history, and enable Flinders’ story to reach a wider range of readers he termed as “the multitude” (Letter to George Mackaness 1940). Hill was not convinced by Cousin’s theory but she eventually complied with her publisher’s demands and presented historical and biographical information in an accessible and entertaining format. She was rewarded with a best-selling novel. The experience supports Jaime Harker’s examination of modes of authorship, which notes that middlebrow writers and publishers made decisions about book design and promotion that were reader focused (16).

The sentimentality that dominated Hill’s narrative and its title was reflected in the first edition’s dust jacket. The prose located on the front flap of the book cover promoted the novel as the “tragedy of a man whom duty took from the woman he loved, who, after shining achievements, died unhonoured and in want.” This sentiment was mirrored in the image that dominated the front of the book cover—Hill’s emotive tale of a loving couple divided by war and hardship was represented by the scene of a woman waving goodbye to a ship leaving port. The picture is attributed to artist and writer Geoffrey C. Ingleton in the bottom right corner of the cover. Hill was not impressed with Ingleton’s dust jacket or the book’s title. Her 1941 letter to Angus and Robertson’s influential editor Beatrice Davis outlined her resigned disappointment at her inability to convince the publisher to adopt her preferred title and a book jacket designed by her son Robert (Letter to Beatrice Davis). The title Hill wanted to adopt was “He Named Australia” (Letter to George Mackaness 1941). This choice focused on Flinders’ discoveries and cartography rather than his relationship with his wife. The letter is another indication of Hill’s original intention to produce a serious biography of Flinders

rather than a romance novel, but the publisher prioritised their need to appeal to a wide pool of readers rather than Hill's objections.

A handwritten note that now sits inside Ingleton's copy of the first edition of *My Love Must Wait*, now held by the Mitchell Library, highlights the tensions between Hill and Angus and Robertson concerning the book's promotion as a romance rather than a biography. Ingleton's note claims that when Cousins was not satisfied with Hill's proposed title and book jacket he sought a selection of alternatives. It is claimed that Cousin's decision

raised great opposition from the author, who bombarded A & R with telegrams in objections. Mr Cousins told her, if the title was not used he could not publish. My title proved an instant success and was gratefully acknowledged by the author. (Note)

Cousins' success at targeting the novel to a ready market was unequivocal. Morris described *My Love Must Wait* as one of the bestselling locally published novels from the period (226). After the novel's successful publication Hill wrote an apologetically toned letter to Ingleton that acknowledged his positive involvement in the novel's production.

Hill admitted that Ingleton's title and book jacket cleverly tapped into wartime sentiments and anxieties concerning loss and separation. She stated that "at this time, when so many loves are waiting, it was a stroke of genius ... you will, perhaps, kindly, forget my first hostile reactions. The whole world loves a lover" (Letter to Geoffrey Ingleton). This view was confirmed by an *Australian Women's Weekly* reviewer who claimed that at a time "when Australia faces the gravest emergency in its history, this story is an inspiration to the men and women who defend the shores he charted" ("The Man Who Named Australia" 31). Hill's initial



objections about the novel's promotion as a melodramatic romance rather than a biography appear contradictory in the light of her acknowledgement that she consciously gave the novel a theatrical tone to widen its appeal.

The novel's sphere of influence extended beyond adult readers; it was added to several school curricula and was adapted as a radio serial (Morris 226). This had formed part of Hill's original plan. Her 1940 letter to Mackaness claimed that she was in the process of dramatising the text and writing "the book from the point of view of the motion pictures, creating all the scenes and characters—for radio reading—for play conversation, and for any other purposes, without losing its value as a standard work on Flinders" (Letter to George Mackaness 1940). In the novel's afterword she also claimed that: "I hoped some day to write the story never yet told in full—not in stark biographical form, but that Australia might see it in living character" (*My Love Must Wait* 454). Hill's flamboyant plan to rescue Flinders' reputation from obscurity did not require a great shift in her writing because her prose was typically dominated by dramatic flair.

Hill was successful in her endeavour to draw attention to Flinders' achievements as an explorer and cartographer. One of Flinders' biographers Anthony J. Brown describes Hill as instrumental in recovering Flinders' personae and achievements to the public imagination. Brown claims that "it was left to the Australian writer Ernestine Hill to elevate Matthew Flinders to the status of national hero" (474). Prior to the publication of Hill's novel there had only been one Flinders' biography, *The Life of Captain Matthew Flinders RN* (1914) by Ernest Scott. Since *My Love Must Wait* there has been a steady stream of biographical work on Flinders, including Sidney J. Baker's *My Own Destroyer* (1962); K. A. Austin's *The Voyage of the Investigator 1801-1803* (1964); James D.

Mack's *Matthew Flinders 1774-1814* (1966); R. W. Russell's *Matthew Flinders: The Ifs of History* (1979); Geoffrey C. Ingleton's *Matthew Flinders: Navigator and Chartmaker* (1986), the creator of Hill's dust jacket for *My Love Must Wait*; Catharine Retter's *Letters to Ann* (1998); Brown's *Ill-Starred Captains: Flinders and Baudin* (2000); Mirriam Estensen's *Matthew Flinders: The Life of Matthew Flinders* (2002); Klaus Toft's *The Navigators: Flinders vs Baudin* (2002); Jean Fornasiero, Peter Monteath and John West-Sooby's *Encountering Terra Australis* (2004); Marion Body's *The Fever of Discovery* (2006); and most recently David Hill's *The Great Race* (2012) and Rob Mundle's *Flinders: The Man Who Mapped Australia* (2012).

The amount of correspondence and firsthand accounts by those involved in Flinders' journeys and discoveries provides his biographers with a comprehensive range of primary sources. The personal accounts of Flinders' surveying voyages are contained in *Observations on the Coasts of Van Diemen's Land on Bass's Strait and its Islands and on Part of the Coasts of New South Wales* (1801) and *A Voyage to Terra Australis* (1814). As Hill's writing was generally prone to effusiveness and exaggeration—for example, she was harshly criticised for contributing to a rush on an unprofitable gold field in the Northern Territory in 1932 (Morris 175)—it is pertinent to scrutinize the extent to which Hill was faithful to accepted biographical details concerning Flinders' life and achievements. This examination reveals that Hill's novel heavily relied on primary documentation in her depictions of Flinders' life after joining the Royal Navy as a fourteen year old in 1789, and his three voyages to the landmass referred to as New South Wales in the east and New Holland in the west.

Hill's novel recounted in detail Flinders' interactions with other well-known figures in Australia's settlement history. Flinders first set foot on Australian soil in 1772 in Tasmania, then called Van Diemen's Land, when he served under Captain William Bligh on *HMS Providence*. The *Providence* had a brief sojourn at Bruny Island during a voyage from England to Tahiti and the West Indies. When later serving on *HMS Reliance* Flinders journeyed south for the second time and arrived in Sydney in 1795. The ship's surgeon was George Bass, the man with whom Flinders would later circumnavigate Tasmania. Also on board were two noted figures in Australia's history who were given significant roles in Hill's narrative; Governor John Hunter and the Aboriginal man known as Bennelong, who was returning home after travelling to England in 1792 (Estensen 45). The inclusion of these figures in Hill's narrative allowed her to present a range of reactions to the Australian landscape, Indigenous population and the colonial process.

Hill covered Flinders' exploits in the colony in detail. He made several supply trips between Sydney, Norfolk Island and the Cape of Good Hope. When not on duty he joined Bass and a servant called William Martin in two coastal journeys in a small boat affectionately christened *Tom Thumb*. Bass and Flinders also made separate coastal surveys that enabled them to compare their findings against the hypothesis that a strait separated Tasmania from the main landmass. In 1798 Hunter gave the pair the opportunity to prove the theory in the sloop *Norfolk*. The success of the mission was significant as the confirmation of the strait's existence provided a shorter route between Europe and New South Wales (Estenson 479). The discovery also cemented the men's names in Australian history.

The thirst for discovery continued to drive Flinders' pursuit of a successful naval career. His first publication outlined his findings and experiences and identified him as a man of promise (Fornasiero, Monteath and West-Sooby 35), and brought him to the attention of the highly influential Sir Joseph Banks. The scientist became Flinders' benefactor and influenced processes which awarded the young officer the command of *HMS Investigator*. As a result Flinders returned to New South Wales for the third time (Perry 55). This expedition's primary mission was to circumnavigate the entire southern landmass and establish whether one or several straights or channels divided the nation on a north/south axis (Fornasiero, Monteath and West-Sooby 296). Although Flinders was an inexperienced naval commander T. M. Perry describes him as a man of tremendous energy and drive who pushed himself, his officers and crew to their limits while maintaining their affection and loyalty (51; 52).

Flinders' persistence and strong leadership ensured that the leaky *Investigator* successfully circumnavigated the continent despite being deemed unfit for further service on its return to Sydney. Not content with his incomplete coastal survey, Flinders attempted to return to England so he might gain the command of a new ship and return to complete his map of the southern continent. This plan did not eventuate as Flinders' journey to England was fraught with a series of disasters that culminated in his imprisonment in 1803 by the French on Isle de France (now known as Mauritius). Flinders was not released from French custody until 1810. He returned to Britain an ill and penniless man rather than the commander of a successful surveying expedition. Although he managed to complete his memoir and oversee the production of a coastal chart, Flinders was unable to regain the

attention of Banks or the Admiralty and soon died in obscurity (Brown 446-50; 460).

Hill's account of the highs and lows of Flinders' life adhered closely to the accepted details outlined above. Her novel may seem to exaggerate the loving nature of the relationship between Flinders and his wife Ann Chappell, however, sentimental letters between the pair verify a close and affectionate attachment (Perry 49). Hill deviated from accepted biographical details in her depiction of Flinders' childhood. *My Love Must Wait* portrayed Flinders and Bass as childhood friends (37) yet most biographers suggest that the two Lincolnshire men did not meet until they served together onboard the *Reliance* (Estensen 46). Hill's account of a significant meeting between the young Flinders and Banks was also fiction as most biographers assert that Flinders did not meet Banks until much later, probably in 1793 or 1794 (Perry 55). Hill's departure from accepted details of Flinders' childhood served a particular purpose. They enabled her to present a predestined connection between Flinders and the mysterious southern continent that dominated his personal life and naval career.

The first chapter of *My Love Must Wait* theatrically builds momentum to a chance encounter between Banks and the young main protagonist. The meeting between the boy and the statesman is depicted as being of such significance that it influenced the course of Flinders' life. The meeting occurred after the young Flinders became so distracted by his dreams of becoming an explorer that he wandered far from home until he was caught unawares in a fierce storm. The tempest was a portent that a significant episode in the young character's life was about to take place: "Storms he loved. They heralded events" (4). The momentous meeting occurred after the boy was rescued by a servant of Banks, an ex-sailor who

had served with Banks and Captain James Cook on their voyage to the southern continent.

The young character was taken to Banks' country home where he was instantly entranced by the tales he heard of the land that the novel described as a place where the "trees of earth and stars of heaven were new—a magic land, a Land With-out a Name" (13). The night had a magical quality as it cast a spell over Flinders. While he enjoyed the comforts of Banks' home his family searched for the boy they thought was lost in the storm. Although Flinders was soon returned to his family, from that point onwards his future was tied to the landmass that would become the nation called Australia (17). The meeting with Banks inspired the main protagonist to become doggedly focused on joining the navy and travelling to Australia. Hill depicted Flinders' first sighting of the southern land as an overwhelming pseudo-spiritual encounter. The character was struck by the strange scene before him that was dominated by "the sepulchral columns of mighty trees, thirty feet in circumference, boughs twining like serpents" (54). The curious blue gloom of the landscape depressed yet entranced Hill's character to the extent that it left him desperate to return so he might become involved in documenting its shape and form (54).

When the main protagonist looked set to achieve his goal of travelling to Australia by gaining a position onboard the *Reliance*, he excitedly informed Bass:

To New South Wales! Exploring! For this was I born. I knew it! I tell you, George, the place is unknown, a vacant space in the map. 'Tis the most elusive of all the ocean's secrets. For centuries it has been fable. Tasman sailed right round it, and did not find it. Cook never thought of it till it was there, before his eyes! In all his explorations, he girdled the earth, but he

scarce alighted in this great island—if it be an island. When I was in Van Diemen's Land, I looked north to it and visioned it. When I was in the Torres Strait, I looked south and beheld it. I longed to go. Now the wish of my heart is answered. (120)

While the character missed his family he devoted himself to his career and worked “like a man possessed” (235). Brown's biography supports Hill's depiction of Flinders' unswerving desire for success and renown as a navigator and hydrographer. Brown cites a letter from Flinders to Banks in which the navigator stated that his best chance at improving his status in the navy and society was to excel in the role of coastal surveyor (467). Fornasiero, Monteath and West-Sooby also make note of Flinders' driving ambition to excel in his career and escape the narrow provincialism that dominated his home town of Donington, Lincolnshire (285).

Due to the concurrent attempts of French expeditions to chart the southern continent, a sense of urgency underpinned the ambitions of Hill's main protagonist to complete his coastal survey. He feared that the success of the French in this endeavour would spell disaster to his own ambitions. Hill's depiction of competing national rivalries was shared by Brown, Toft and David Hill. As the two frequently warring nations sought to stake their claim on the southern continent, their mission of conquest and colonisation disregarded the claims of Indigenous people. *My Love Must Wait* reflected the manner in which the battle for empire paid little heed to Indigenous people or culture. Hill's portrayal of the settlement of Australia may be viewed as typical of middlebrow writing which sought to placate readers and avoid challenging topics such as race, but Harker refutes such claims. She identifies a section of middlebrow writing that was “created by design, not by default” (18).

This writing consciously undertook critical examinations of issues that unsettled dominant views. Hill's biographical portrayal of Flinders acknowledged and explored the effect his actions had on Aboriginal populations who were dispossessed by Britain's new colony.

Whether seen or unseen the Indigenous presence is constant in the Australian episodes of *My Love Must Wait*. Aboriginal characters living on the fringe of the Sydney settlement or in isolated coastal regions are depicted as powerless to withstand the unstoppable and brutal colonial juggernaut. The fearful reactions of a remote group of Aborigines led the main protagonist to conclude that these people had experienced a sufficient amount of contact with settlers to realise that guns were "the white man's death-stick" (147). This scene is repeated in allegorical form in Hill's account of an incident documented in *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, where Flinders noted the ease with which his landing party slaughtered a group of tame kangaroos who lived an isolated existence on an island. The lack of fear exhibited by the animals to the presence of Flinders' crew demonstrated that this was their first contact with white men (Vol 1 169).

Hill's depiction of this incident exaggerated Flinders' reaction to the passivity of the kangaroos in the face of their wholesale slaughter. Her main protagonist was greatly dismayed by the prevailing need of his crew to kill and consume these quiet and noble creatures. In the face of the onslaught Hill wrote that the "poor gentle creatures, the kangaroos showed no terror. They stood, bewildered by the noise, to be peppered between the eyes with small shot, beaten to death with sticks" (*My Love Must Wait* 245). Hill's character was conflicted by the fact that not only were his "the first footsteps on unmemoried sands" (245), he had "brought death by violence and shattered faith" (246). The experience shamed him.



The reaction of the kangaroos was contrasted with those of the island's seal population who were not surprised by the violence meted out by white men.

The wariness of the seals at the arrival of Flinders' landing party revealed that they had a prior experience of violence at the hands of white men. In contrast to the kangaroos, the seals "fled from the sound of shot. The seals were travellers, and they remembered. On southward coasts of ice translucent, once they had trusted, and been betrayed" (246). This account becomes a metaphor for the violent nature of white settlement. While the main protagonist was described as a "pathfinder of empire" (257) and his ship was depicted as a "white-winged courier of a nation yet to be" (260), Hill's character was conflicted by his role as an agent of Empire. The analogous novel challenged the reader to reconsider settler history and recognise the hostile nature of colonial conquest. It demonstrates Harker's claim that middlebrow novels were capable of making nuanced political connections that might influence individual readers (18).

Hill depicted Flinders as uncomfortable at the disruption to Indigenous cultures caused by white settlement and its inhabitants. He declared that "for the sake of those who come after us, we must make a good impression with these Australians" (242). In an effort to placate his anxieties the righteous Captain demanded that all those in his command avoid interracial conflict at all cost. This scene was included in *Voyage to Terra Australis*; so too was the navigator's annoyance when he suspected that his men had instigated a clash with a group of Aborigines (Vol 2 196). Despite Hill's depiction of her character's sympathy for the Indigenous population, his desire to rise to prominence in the Royal Navy ensured that he continued in his endeavours. Questions of rights, ownership and belonging did not deter Flinders' involvement in a process with claimed another

people's land for the benefit of his nation and his career. Hill's novel was nuanced rather than simplistically romantic and oblivious to racial complexities.

A level of melancholy is evident in Hill's descriptions of the degradation and displacement caused to Aboriginal people by the white settlement that she frequently depicted as depraved. Sympathy for the plight of Aborigines attempting to live in white society is apparent in her account of Bennelong's inability to gain acceptance in either white or black society after his return from England: "The whites called him a black man, and the blacks called him a white man. Nobody wanted him now" (*My Love Must Wait* 150). Despite the acknowledgement that much harm was caused to Indigenous society by white settlement *My Love Must Wait* was not a treatise that advocated transformative social change. As Harker suggests, middlebrow writing was not inherently progressive but neither was it inherently conservative (20). Hill's writing was racially ambiguous and did not always deal with matters of race in a sensitive manner.

The writing of Hill, Idriess and Upfield frequently adopted negative racial stereotypes and racist language. Morris describes Hill as an imperialist, white supremacist and patriot whose writing maintained the position of Aborigines as the Other (172). Hill's representations of race were certainly varied and often insensitive, but at times her writing was insightful. In *The Great Australian Loneliness* Hill suggested that

to rank the Australian native as a moron and a gorilla man is to do him a very grave injustice ... To look closer and with kindlier eyes is to discover that the aboriginal is redeemed by the delicate sensitive ear of the true musician, a remarkable gift of languages, the sudden smile and the quiet,

quick laughter of a very real sense of human ... The worst that might be said of him is that he is a child of his environment. (171)

Her awareness of the racial ambivalence inherent in Australia's race relations was evident in her willingness to question the superiority of Western culture.

*The Territory* presented a similar level of racial dichotomy. This social history frequently adopted negative racial stereotypes, however, it also suggested that some members of white society appeared far less civilised and intelligent than the Aboriginal people they disparaged. This view was evident in an incident in which an unnamed white statesman expressed concern at the suggestion that he utilise the services of an Aboriginal guide. He claimed to be unsure concerning whether the Aboriginal man could speak English, drive a car or eat cooked food (345). Ridiculing his query, Hill suggested that

His Excellency would not realize that a history, tradition, law and religion far older on earth than his own were expressed in this traveller from antiquity, this ethnological curio ... For too long the Australian blacks, by friend and foe, were looked upon as something less than human. If a quick adaptability to environment is the test of intelligence, they are the equal of any race on earth. (345)

Hill's writing perpetuated racial stereotypes more often than it challenged them, which suggests that the consistency with which *My Love Must Wait* examined notions of white superiority can be viewed as a reaction to the tumult instigated by World War II. Her novel questioned the assumption that Western society was naturally placed at the pinnacle of a racial hierarchy.

*My Love Must Wait* portrayed the white population of Sydney as representatives of an aged and crumbling European order (463). The character of

Governor Hunter described the colony as “a dead end of exile, and misery, and starvation” (133). Sydney was classified as a colony inhabited by rogues and wretches (132) who were driven by base instincts and primitive desires. Hill adopted animalistic imagery to portray a degenerate white population that appeared evil, half-witted, decaying and dangerous (135). In a landscape brimming with a plethora of fauna and flora Hill’s dejected convicts preferred to subsist or die rather than adapt and thrive (138). The incredulous main protagonist claimed that many convicts who survived the darkness and filth of transport ships “could not face the cleansing breath” of the Australian sun (141). The degenerate nature of the white settlement was repeatedly emphasised.

Although they were living in a pristine environment Sydney’s white inhabitants “hid themselves in hollow trees, and cried for their far-away England, and the crime and the grime of old years” (137) while the shimmering bush and sparkling harbour lay all about them, sanctuary of forgiveness and forgetfulness, heritage for their children in the happy years to come. A Providence more merciful than men had brought the prodigals from the Valley of Humiliation into the light, but their hearts were still in darkness and they could not see. (137)

Vice and degeneration dominated Hill’s depiction of a young colony that was barely controlled by barbaric floggings and hangings. Flinders was shocked to discover that the answer to this problem was to use an island located in the seaward approach to Sydney as a site for regular hangings (134). The image this macabre scene presented was dominated by death and incivility.

Hill depicted a section of the Aboriginal population as equally repulsed by the despoliation and defilement of the island known to them as Wattamanyi. Before

the advent of white settlement the island was “a little fishing-heaven of happy legend; but since the white man had made it a place of horror the black would never go back” (135). The contrast between the white population and some of the Aboriginal communities was blatant. The main character found it incongruent that the lawless and debauched colony (135) failed to thrive in a land where the “the air is pure, the mind wholesome, the land a dream of heaven” (159). To make this image worse, the fallen populace appeared to revel in its corruption and delighted in its disregard for British mores and values. While the novel embraced the view that the penal colony was peopled by the dregs of British society, the widespread degeneracy of the colony unsettled notions that Western European society was inherently superior to that of the Indigenous population. The reader was left to question which group was the most primitive and barbaric.

Hill’s examination of white superiority was pertinent during a period in which Western European nations fought over ideology, national borders and dominion. As World War II raged and Europe sank to new depths of depravity with the assistance of mechanised warfare *My Love Must Wait* challenged the notion that Western societies that had resorted to barbarity on an unprecedented scale should be viewed as bastions of civility. Hill used a romance novel to provoke readers emotions, a tendency Harker identifies in middlebrow writing. The novel stirred sentiments such as love, patriotism, self-sacrifice, pity and devotion to satisfy wartime readers’ desire for entertaining narratives that contained characters they could identify with and who could help them “understand modern life” (20).

Hill’s main protagonist was critical of the wars waged between Britain and France in his lifetime. After experiencing a sea battle in his youth Flinders asked a fellow officer “what does war ever achieve save woe?” (118). The experienced

naval officer simply replied: “Without war there would be no empire” (118). The young character was not convinced that warfare was unavoidable or acceptable, claiming instead that

my ideal is a world in which the affairs of nations might be decided in wise deliberation and mutual agreement, or by buying and selling if you will, but without violence and the hatred of our brother man. Then would our hands be free for great achievement in science and discovery. (118)

Hill was heavily critical of warfare in *My Love Must Wait* and her correspondence.

Hill’s 1945 letter to Robertson recounted a car journey she undertook to Darwin. When Hill arrived at the northern town she was struck by the bare apocalyptic post-war landscape and the strange juxtaposition it presented between the colonial past and the war-weary present. Hill wrote: “If you could just see Darwin—the ghost of the old, the chaos of the new ... It was a very weird experience to travel up this eerie Highway, a thousand miles of mystery and glory, to that demented city—exactly like a surrealist’s fantods” (Letter to Constance Robertson). The letter’s examination of the disturbing reality faced by northern Australians in a surrealist rather than nostalgic framework, revealed an awareness of tensions generated by a postcolonial nation’s past and its attempt to embrace modernism. This nuance is missed by those who readily dismiss Hill’s preoccupation with settler history. Her focus on disappearing settler lifestyles and communities often overshadowed a concurrent interest in the creation of a bright future for a nation of promise.

Hill’s interest in the nation’s future and her criticism of a continued preoccupation with Western European culture and history was evident in her allegorical exploration of post-war renewal in *My Love Must Wait*. Stuart

Macintyre noted the commencement of post-war reconstruction planning in the early 1940s (198). Hill's novel presented a positive image of post-war renewal via its depiction of the first white Australian-born generation. While the majority of the colony's adult inhabitants was a complaining morass of corruption their children displayed a vastly different disposition. Those who were born on Australian soil were settled and at home in landscapes that were alien and threatening to older inhabitants who yearned for Britain. The colony's youths were depicted as healthy, capable and "truly beautiful. Born in the shadow of the gallows and the whipping-post, they were healthy and happy" (141). This generation "rambled the paths of the bush. Hungry they may have been, but the crime and the grime missed them" (142). The novel's examination of settlement history suggested that, despite the chaos and uncertainty facing post-war Australia, the future held much promise.

This image was supported by Hill's non-fiction texts and *Walkabout* articles, which suggested that the nation could successfully reinvent itself. P. G. Harding's *Sydney Morning Herald* review of *The Territory* noted Hill's unerring belief that the region's future potential could be achieved with the aid of modern technology, infrastructure and careful planning (9). In a similar fashion, Morris describes Hill as one of a range of writers who recycled and reappropriated the "bush mythos" with a modernist slant and genuine interest in technological advancements:

*Water Into Gold* can equally be described as a case study in the history of industrialisation, *Flying Doctor Calling* as a profile of an experiment in extending public health and medical technology, and both *The Great Australian Loneliness* and *The Territory* as early studies in the politics of tourism. Throughout her career Hill was interested in, and on the whole an

ardent exponent of, almost every aspect of what is now casually called  
 “Development.” (171)

Hill’s 1939 *Walkabout* article “Crocodiles and Pink Lotus” was one of many that supported this suggestion. The article claimed that a bright national future could be effected if people were willing to invest capital in non-urban areas. Hill asked the reader to consider the “miracles conservation and irrigation might achieve in this country” (13). As she travelled through remote Australia she not only gained a sense of the past, she also saw a vast and untapped potential that could be developed for the nation’s benefit.

Hill’s belief in the inherent yet unrealised potential of north-west Australia was also apparent in “Glory Of The Islands” which asserted that “between Derby and Darwin lies a kingdom of the future unexplored” (36). The article described the islands and ranges in this region as “alight with mineral promise ... The vast potentialities are all unrealized ... Such is the glory of the undiscovered islands, hidden away in a corner of the continent that is scarcely on the map, a heritage unclaimed” (38). Hill’s bright vision for the future was repeated in her 1958 *Walkabout* article “Pink Lake and Monsieur Riche” which applauded a development scheme funded by American and British interests seeking to develop hundreds of farms in Esperance, Western Australia. She viewed this region as “a land of wonder” (29) rather than the arid wasteland that “we have maligned for so long” (30). Hill was unapologetic in her admiration of outback scenes and settlement history, but she was equally interested in the development of a prosperous and distinct nation. Looking backwards in time not only provided a sense of shared history and identity, it revealed that the nation was capable of dreaming a bright future into existence.



*My Love Must Wait* not only attempted to remediate interest in Flinders' personal life and career, it revealed the manner in which a nation was imagined into being. As Hill's main protagonist sailed around the Australian coast, he worked feverishly on his mission to be the first to complete the outline of the continent that Britain was in the process of claiming in its entirety: "The vacant spaces of the map!—Flinders worked like a man possessed, by day charting the islands and by night giving them away" (235). This process negated the existence of any prior claims to the landscape by Indigenous people and highlighted the manner in which, according to Roslynn Haynes, "the landscape we observe is a cultural construct" (3). The focus of Hill's novel on cartography reveals how different depictions of the same physical location can suit a range of purposes and convey vastly disparate images.

Bill Ashcroft claims that map making was fundamentally an act of power long used by European nations to describe, but more importantly to imagine a particular nation into being and to control an image as something that was a representation of a "real" world. He claimed that "maps are the ultimate metonym of representation itself—ideology in material form—and nowhere have maps been so important as in Australia because the discursive control of place has been such a struggle" ("Is Australian Literature Post-Colonial?" 7). In *My Love Must Wait* Flinders obliterated all that existed before white settlement by drafting the shape and form of a British landscape. Landforms were given British names while Indigenous names were adopted sparingly. This indicated that Flinders' focus was firmly placed on creating the idea of a British nation. He realised the great significance of cartography and nomenclature, claiming that while he was poor in monetary terms, he was as rich as Croesus for he had kingdoms to bestow (235).

The novel supports Kate Darian-Smith's view that the colonial frontier was "not only a geographical space, but a powerful imaginative site" (99). Hill's novel is not a simplistic romance, for complexity is evident in its representation of cartography as an effective means of exerting and maintaining control over landscapes and generating a sense of nation.

In Hill's novel maps functioned as a means of domination because they enabled Britain to erase the oral histories and rights of the Indigenous population it refused to recognise as land owners. The power inherent in written documentation was also evident in her 1936 article "Story of the State," which appeared in *The Centenary Chronicle 1836-1936*. This publication was produced by the South Australian *Advertiser* to celebrate the state's centenary of white settlement. Hill's article negated the existence of a long established Indigenous culture and history by suggesting that prior to white settlement "of history these coasts had none." The suggestion that the Australian landscape lacked an identity, culture and history before it was charted by Europeans was absurd, but it illustrates Ashcroft's claim that "the power of language to construct the physical environment is one that the colonised must always contend" ("Is Australian Literature Post-Colonial" 7).

In *My Love Must Wait* the rights of the Indigenous population were effectively negated by English documentation. Flinders was so aware of this powerful process that his greatest fear was that his maps might be stolen by the French and used in the publication of a map that ascribed French names to landforms on the southern continent. As a result, Flinders was bereft when his maps were taken by the French after he was detained on Isle de France. He was not only worried for himself, he was also concerned that the loss of the maps might enable the French to steal the new southern empire from Britain (392). Cartography

was presented as not only a means of establishing ownership over a country, but as an ideological weapon used to exert a sense of ownership and control a nation's identity.

*My Love Must Wait* could be enjoyed by readers as a romance but it also encouraged a critical examination of nation building and identity. Hill's depiction of an encounter between her main protagonist and Nicolas Baudin, the commander of a French expeditionary ship whom Flinders met off the coast of South Australia during his *Investigator* voyage, supported the idea that changing the names ascribed to the features of a landscape could be used to extinguish prior claims and alter that country's identity. In the novel Flinders was disconcerted after perusing Baudin's map of the southern continent's coastline because the landforms to which Flinders had ascribed English names were instantly transformed by Baudin's application of French nomenclature. As Flinders read the French map familiar landscapes were transformed into an unrecognisable space, a space conquered by another nation (391). The ideological power exerted by map makers was further illustrated by Hill's preferred title for her novel, which was "He Named Australia."

This title was a reference to Flinders' desire to adopt Australia rather than Terre Australis on the map and memoir he published in 1814 (Estensen 450). Hill's depiction of Flinders' preference suggested that the word "Australia" generated an image of youthfulness and hope. The novel implied that the name accurately reflected the continent's true character:

This is a young land, a kingdom of the sun, a world for youth to conquer.

The Spaniards called it Terra del Oro, the Land of Gold—that was better—or Austrialia del Espiritu Santo, that was better still. The Great South Land of the Holy Spirit. There's music, a benediction in the name. Out of these

misty scraps of maps, we're going to make a true one. Whatever we find, I call the whole land Australia! (231)

It was presumptuous of Flinders to presume that a man of his standing could influence those who would choose the new name of an expanding British colony, yet the attempt revealed the power that a name exerted on the process of imagining a nation into being. Hill's sentimental romance not only provided the reader with an insight into the life of a forgotten historical figure, it revealed the need to re-negotiate postcolonial anxieties concerning belonging and identity. Was Australia an old or new nation? Was Australia a distinct nation or a British outpost? These questions were poignant at a time when nations were emerging from World War II, a conflict in which countries were invaded and people subjugated.

*My Love Must Wait* was not an isolated attempt to rediscover the settler histories Hill feared were not being adequately recognised and valued by urban populations. Much of her writing encouraged the urban reader to expand their notion of nation beyond urban concepts, and to develop a sense of familiarity and ease with remote Australia. This was evident in *The Great Australian Loneliness* where Hill argued the nation was in danger of losing an important connection to its settler past. The remaining members of the pioneering generation were described as "friends of the old Australia. The new one has left them behind" (45). Hill lamented the unrecognised passing of a golden age by Australia's urban population, termed as "six million post-office clock Australians" (18), who lived in cities that exhibited a "sameness" or lack of character (7). Southern regions were described as the smug, colour-conscious White Australia situated below the twentieth parallel (340). Inhabitants were portrayed as living in ignorance and fear concerning the world that existed beyond urban boundaries. Apartment blocks were viewed as

fortresses designed to protect anxious residents from the dangers inherent in non-urban regions (340). Hill's desire to tempt the reader to engage with non-urban histories and realities was present in a number of her *Walkabout* articles.

Hill claimed in "Crocodiles and Pink Lotus" that too few of those living in southern areas knew about "the mystery and beauty of the big rivers of the north" (13). The ignorance of the main urban centres was similarly reflected in her 1940 *Walkabout* article "Overlanders." The writer claimed here that while "prose and poetry have glorified the drovers' existence" (37), in reality stockmen endured harsh conditions and a meagre diet of salted meat in order to ensure city gourmets could enjoy prime beef cuts. Hill's suggested antidote to the ignorance of urban dwellers was to present readers with a range of entertaining outback tales. Her 1939 *Walkabout* article "Along the Last Lost Border" provided multiple accounts of the exploits, stoicism and humour of stockmen who matched the stereotypical image of the Australian bushman:

The whole Territory still remembers Jim Ligar ... He was attacked in the Jasper Gorge with Mulligan, the first teamster to Victoria River Downs.

They piled up their flour-bags as [a] barricade, and held the fort in a shower of spears from the cliffs. Ligar was pinioned through the nose—one of those droll characters in whose lives even tragedy turns to comedy. His nose was ever afterwards numb, and he entertained acquaintances by pushing hat-pins through it. (41)

The legendary exploits of bushmen that Hill wanted the current generation to remember were recounted in much of her non-fiction.

In Hill's 1949 *Walkabout* article "Along the Murran-Ji" the efforts of stockmen working on the Murran-Ji Track were dramatically hampered by thirst,

illness and death. The article dwelt on the harsh environmental factors that dictated whether stockmen and their herds lived or died. The waterhole that was the most difficult to reach on this route, Top Springs, caused the most consternation: “some still living have galloped a hundred miles to it, trying to beat the water-bags, trying to beat delirium ... A few have crawled in on hands and knees” (18). Hill’s writing about remote Australian characters and lifestyles was melodramatic but it struck a chord with readers.

Hill’s books sold well and she had her supporters. Fellow travel writer George Farwell’s 1950 *Walkabout* article “On the Murrniji” supported Hill’s depiction of outback life in “Along the Murrniji” (48). The persistent attempts of Hill’s *Walkabout* articles to foreground Australia’s settler heritage illustrates her support for the development of a distinct national identity and cultural expressions. Her 1942 letter to Mackaness refuted suggestions that Australian literature should emulate other national forms. Instead, Hill argued that the

inferiority complex that seems to be a hang-over from the convict and colonial days and makes us ape the English in super-sophistication and boredom won’t do. A little child-like wonder will do us good, and interest the world ... I might overdo it a little here and there, but that is better than falling flat. (Letter to George Mackaness 1942)

There was little danger of Hill’s colourful writing style ever falling flat. A *West Australian* review of *The Territory* did not exaggerate when it described her writing as urgent and breathless (“Bad and Beautiful Territory” 16). Hill’s vivid history of the Northern Territory, in many ways the pinnacle of her life’s work, sought to reduce the lack of knowledge and concern for northern Australia amongst southern populations.

Hill's foreword to *The Territory* claimed that the text was an ode to a unique but fading period that "until twenty years ago ... was so far away from the rest of Australia that it was a land of legend" (3). Her 1939 letter to Mackaness illustrated the longstanding nature of this view. She stated that the men and women "whose lives have been epics are fading away, and their memories must not be lost. I know that such stories, with all their tragedy and their humour and heroism, will be of value to Australia" (Letter to George Mackaness 1939). Her 1948 letter to Mackaness repeated this concern and acknowledged her desire to influence readers: "no-one will ever know the anguish of their years up [north] unless I do something about it" (Letter to George Mackaness 1948).

Hill's correspondence suggested that a sympathetic history was required to counter the negativity that was likely to be present in future historiography that was based on official sources: "The attitude of all those paid government new-comers is most contemptuous to those who suffered so incredibly and so long. How often I have heard them say 'There's never been anyone here but a pack of old comboes!'" (Letter to George Mackaness 1948). The comment illustrated Hill's refusal to countenance the notion that remote populations largely consisted of degenerate mixed-race social outcasts. Instead, she hoped that *The Territory* might educate southern readers who "had no idea of the valuable fibre of colonization wasted in good faith up there" (Letter to George Mackaness 1951). Others shared Hill's enthusiasm. "Bad and Beautiful Territory" suggested *The Territory* "should be known by every Australian and the experiences of the past 100 years could profitably be studied by politicians, private investors and misguided enthusiasts before any further grandiose schemes for development are worked up" (16). Hill

was adamant that remote Australia and its rich history could play an important role in supporting the development of a prosperous nation with a unique identity.

Hill was committed to her endeavour to educate urban readers concerning outback landscapes, settler history and development potential of non-urban Australia. This was evident in her correspondence with Alice Mackaness:

The Loneliness was written in the night hours til two in the morning after long busy days on the Advertiser here. Water Into Gold was written from 9am till two in the morning for three months, after four months up and down the river collecting; Flinders was written over a long period of plain anguish, also most of it till three in the morning, when I was on the ABC Weekly from 9.30 until 6. (Letter to Alice Mackaness)

Despite her best efforts Hill acknowledged that her writing lent itself to criticism, but in the letter she defended *My Love Must Wait* against a critical review by the *Bulletin*, stating that the reviewer was

certainly not very friendly, and except in one insignificant quotation seems to have selected the little bits for ridicule with some satisfaction. At first I felt sensitive about this ... I won't say anything about the accusations of "stage scenery" and "favourite tricks," and fluffier than life, except that if we did dramatise our country a little more for the millions, it would do us much good. (Letter to George Mackaness 1942)

Morris noted the *Bulletin's* willingness to pillory Hill's writing for its "sentimentality, purple rhetoric, and rosy optimism that made it appeal to a mass, not literary (and feminine, not robust), sensibility" (168). At a time when many sought to imitate British and American cultural expressions, Hill boldly encouraged Australians to embrace their heritage and status as "the sons and daughters of those



who made the whole continent their own in the first hundred years” (*Australia Land of Contrasts* n.pag.). While many venerated Western Europe Hill encouraged a re-imagining of Australia’s unique identity.

Her folksy anecdotes, stereotypical character sketches, picturesque descriptions of the landscape and flamboyant writing style were out of fashion by the end of the 1950s (Morris 168). Despite this, her fiction and non-fiction facilitates an examination of the past and the influence of mid-twentieth-century middlebrow writing on the development of a modern national identity. The interest of one *Walkabout* reader in this process was evident in a letter he wrote to the editor in 1966, in which he claimed that after reading *The Great Australian Loneliness* he

was surprised to find that some of [Hill’s] early work was first published in *Walkabout*. I wonder if these writings could be re-published? Some of the stories she tells would provide interesting comparisons with much of Australia today, particularly north-west Western Australia. (Campbell 5)

Campbell’s letter supports Darian-Smith’s view that while “no longer threatening, the frontier remained an important imaginative site for white Australians, inciting nostalgia and a considerable curiosity” (109). Morris similarly claimed that

descriptive and travel writing was a way of creating connections between otherwise disparate elements of Australian life, of reinterpreting past and present in “constructivist” fictions of the future, and of trying to mobilise people to “enact” those fictions in reality. (171)

Hill’s writing attempted to make these connections. She took the urban reader on a rollicking but often insightful journey through non-urban landscapes and outback history. The reader was encouraged to reconceptualise the idea of nation. Her focus

on disappearing settler histories and legacies, described as the ghosts of the past, encouraged readers to not only value their nation's heritage but envisage a distinct and modern identity. Rather than simplistically glorify white history, Hill's middlebrow writing contained a critical and provocative subtext. Her re-imagined histories and engagement with the tensions faced by a modernising postcolonial society projected a romanticised vision of hope that resonated with readers for over two decades.

## Chapter Five

### John K. Ewers: Home, Place and Belonging

“Home” is a word with a multitude of meanings. It can simply refer to a geographical location but in this chapter it is viewed as a convergence point for postcolonial anxieties concerning belonging and place. Writers are well positioned to examine the historical and ideological complexities that affect the development of a personal and national sense of home. The literary output of Western Australian writer John “Keith” Ewers (1904-78) placed a strong focus on the discord that dominated mid-twentieth-century Australian definitions of home. This chapter undertakes a close reading of his books and *Walkabout* articles that challenged the identification of Britain as the nation’s spiritual “home.”

Ewers’ fiction and non-fiction suggested that the nation’s bonds to the British motherland should be re-imagined because they ensured Australia’s status could only ever be that of a subordinate member of the Commonwealth. Ann Curthoys identifies a level of cultural anxiety surrounding Australia’s position as a second-rate derivation of Britain (“We’ve Just Started Making National Histories” 71). The unquestioned acceptance of British superiority was produced and authenticated by a double bind; the settler society that sought to mirror its Imperial source was doomed to fail in its endeavour (Rose 45). Ewers rejected the widespread acceptance of Australia’s cultural inferiority. He placed great value on the country’s unique identity and cultural expressions and supported the development of a distinct national literature.

A strong nationalist bias led to Ewers’ involvement in the formation of FAWWA. Ewers was founding president in 1938; president again in 1946; a

member until 1959; and was made a life member in 1967. He was also active in the Australian Society of Authors between 1963-72. This chapter reveals that his involvement in the literary sphere was driven by a desire to encourage writers and readers to connect with their nation's distinct history and culture, and to develop a uniquely Australian sense of identity. His writing was replete with characters who exhibited an Indigenous-styled connection to country that informed their sense of place and enabled them to understand the "true" nature of a country that was geographically and culturally dissimilar to Britain.

Ewers was one of many writers who attempted to portray the "real" Australia. Richard White claims that literature was rife with attempts to capture the nation's essence (*Inventing Australia* viii). The engagement of middlebrow writers with nation and identity has not been well examined (Radway xv), but they were capable of influencing their readers and participating in a complex literary engagement (Shoemaker 7). This chapter argues that Ewers' writing displays a propensity to unsettle widely accepted Eurocentric constructs of home, and to challenge the reader to consider what it meant to be at home on Australian soil. His fiction and non-fiction also reveal a postcolonial tendency to examine critically what Lisa Slater terms as "historical narratives that purport, through abstracting from experiences, to represent historical truths" (358). This level of nuance in Ewers' literary output has not been subject to thorough analysis, therefore, this chapter contributes to the limited extent of scholarship surrounding his work.

## **Biography**

Ewers was familiar with the tensions and complexities that surround the concept of home; his childhood abodes were not always places of refuge or contentment. In a

1975 interview with Shelley Balme he claimed that “I don’t think I had a home until I was ten” (“Interview by Shelley Balme” 1). This was a reference to the years Ewers spent living with members of his extended family while his mother succumbed to a long illness. Life did not greatly improve after he settled back into his father’s household. Ewers asserted in his posthumously published autobiography *Long Enough For a Joke* (1983) that the household of his puritanical, controlling and emotionally distant father was seldom a place of sanctuary (6; 77). The boy felt most at ease rambling in the bush that framed Perth’s outer suburbs (30). Ever the dutiful son, Ewers claimed that when he finished school he felt a sense of obligation and urgency to establish a career that would enable him to assist his father and step-mother financially (“Interview by Shelley Balme” 2). He decided to pursue teaching because writing could not provide an immediate and reliable source of income. It was hoped that this career would provide him with plenty of opportunities to write (73). After failing to gain entry into the metropolitan teacher’s training program at Perth’s Claremont Training College, he completed a year of studies that enabled him to teach at one-teacher country schools.

Another benefit of a teaching career was the provision of a respectable reason to leave home (“Interview by Shelley Balme” 5). In 1924 Ewers happily accepted an appointment at a school located in South Tammin, a Western Australian wheat-belt town. He greatly enjoyed living in this rural district as he claimed that it was here that “the rhythm of the year, the pattern of the seasons became very real to me ... far more real than is possible for anyone who knows Australia only from living in its cities” (*Long Enough* 105). The dominant role that nature played in the life of an agricultural community resonated with the young

man who relished the sense of being close to “the real rhythm of Australia” (105). In a farming community Ewers’ love for native flora and fauna grew. Tony Hughes-d’Aeth notes Ewers’ involvement with like-minded naturalists when he worked in South Tammin and harboured “literary dreams” (“Denizens of the Bush” 52).

In accordance with Ewers’ plans, the teaching appointment in South Tammin provided the opportunity to develop a writing career. A number of his short stories and non-fiction writing, attributed to J. K. Waterjugs, gained publication in newspapers and magazines. In search of greater literary opportunities and an escape from his second teaching post, Ewers returned to Perth in 1929 (“Interview by Shelley Balme” 19). His commitment to writing and an equally strong desire to promote Australian literature led to a position with Perth’s *The West Australian* newspaper. Between 1930 and 1932 Ewers wrote a literary column called “Australiana” that was attributed to “Telamon” (“Interview by Shelley Balme” 27). After the position was terminated due to a “difference of opinion” with the editor (28), Ewers joined rival newspaper the *Daily News* where he produced a weekly column called “The Australian Bookman” until September 1933. He commenced writing this column as “Yorrick” but soon used his real name (28). These prominent positions established Ewers within the Western Australian literary scene.

When *Walkabout* commenced publication in 1934 Ewers claimed that he “immediately wrote to them and asked would they be interested in seeing some articles on the North West. I’d already published quite a lot in the ‘Daily News’ and other places and they replied that they would like to see something” (“Interview by Shelley Balme” 31). Ewers established a close working relationship

with *Walkabout* editor Charles Holmes, who supported Ewers by providing commissions that did not clash with his teaching commitments (31). Ewers described this partnership as “the happiest editor-writer relationship I have experienced in a writing career of over 30 years” (“Discovering Australia Through *Walkabout*” 45). The subjects covered in his *Walkabout* contributions include native flora, horse racing, Aboriginal culture, urban life, various industries and northern Australia.

Although Ewers did not travel as extensively or as often as Ion Idriess, Arthur W. Upfield or Ernestine Hill, his love of remote northern landscapes is evident throughout his writing. In a 1953 letter to fellow writer Leslie Rees, Ewers claimed that “I don’t like to think of the three years spent without a visit up [north], except for an air-trip to Carnarvon back in August. When you’ve fed on sugar-bag honey and drunk the waters of Capricorn, you sure get an appetite for more” (Letter to Leslie Rees). The travel opportunities *Walkabout* provided were used as the basis for Ewers’ travel narrative *With the Sun On My Back* (1953). The memoir was written specifically for the 1950 Commonwealth Jubilee Literary Competition and was awarded equal second place (first place was not awarded that year) (“Interview by Shelley Balme” 48). The book was dedicated to Holmes and the foreword acknowledged the assistance provided by *Walkabout*.

Ewers’ diverse oeuvre includes poetry, short stories, novels, travel writing, journalism, children’s fiction, local history, autobiography and literary criticism. He published five adult novels: *Money Street* (1933), *Fire on the Wind* (1935), *Men Against the Earth* (1946), *For Heroes to Live In* (1948) and *Who Rides on the River?* (1956). He also produced the children’s fantasy novel *Tales From the Dead Heart* (1944); a collection of short stories, *Harvest and Other Stories* (1949); two

collections of poetry, *Boy and Silver* (1929) and *I Came Naked* (1976); a range of English text books; literary criticism including multiple revisions of *Creative Writing in Australia* (1945); and four local Western Australian histories. *The Story of the Pipe-Line* (1935) concerned the Coolgardie water scheme; *Perth Boys' School 1847-1947* (1947) celebrated the centenary of the school; *Bruce Rock* (1959) focused on that district; and *The Western Gateway* (1971) was a history of the city of Fremantle.

The success of *Money Street*, *Men Against the Earth* and *With the Sun On My Back* demonstrated that Ewers wrote best about familiar people and scenes. His most recognised novel is *Money Street*. This unsophisticated and romantic narrative centres on a range of working-class characters living in one of Perth's most picturesque streets. The main protagonist's search for a place to settle and call home repeatedly shifts the readers' focus to the bush on Perth's urban fringe—the landscape in which Ewers felt most comfortable during his childhood (*Long Enough* 30). *Money Street* was generally classified as an admirable first novel but Ewers acknowledged that it was criticised for its sentimentality (226). A review in Perth's *Sunday Times* suggested the novel heavily employed artifice to “play on the reader's sympathies” (“Money Street” 11). The comment jarred the writer who admitted that he intended the novel to be a realistic portrayal of suburban Perth (*Long Enough* 227). Ewers was similarly wounded by Nettie Palmer's review as she declared that she had expected a higher standard of writing from a well-known literary critic (227). A reviewer for Adelaide's *Mail* was also critical of *Money Street*, claiming that the major characters failed to come to life. The reviewer did however, identify the writer's potential: “Mr. Ewers should not be disheartened if ‘Money Street’ is not a best seller. One detects a spark of ability that may some day



be fanned into the flame of success” (“Bodleian,” “New Australian Novelist” 7). Ewers’ inability to execute his literary vision, in this case a depiction of the complexities and tensions within post-war suburbia, was evident in subsequent novels.

Ewers drew on his family history in *Fire on the Wind*, a historical novel loosely based on his father’s nineteenth-century Gippsland farming ancestors (229). The novel was another romance that attempted to engage with complex themes. It compared the sense of place and identity developed by puritanical and domineering British immigrants with their Australian-born adult children, who refused to embrace the edicts of their parents’ motherland. The young generation considered themselves to be “at home” in the Australian bush; their sense of place was firmly based on Australia soil. British tropes were portrayed as irrelevant to indigenised inhabitants (82). Ewers’ depiction of a stark difference between the generations illustrates Catriona Elder’s suggestion that anxieties, desires and ambivalences concerning a white sense of belonging ensured “that securing a strong story about non-Indigenous white belonging is an important aspect of Australian national identity narratives” (*Being Australian* 6). Ewers repeatedly depicted a white population that benefitted from a strong Australian-based sense of connection to place.

*Men Against the Earth* and its sequel *For Heroes to Live In* were influenced by the author’s personal experiences. Both Ewers and the major character Ross “Danny” Daniels were urban-raised teachers from Perth who worked in one-teacher wheat-belt schools in their youth. Danny’s development of a close connection with the local community echoed Ewers’ experience in South Tammin, however, the novels do not present a fictionalised autobiography. Instead, their focus on a rural

community and in particular a young teacher and his country-born wife facilitate an examination of belonging and home.

The two wheat-belt novels were not best-sellers; Ewers' attempt at social realism erred once again on the side of romance. H. M. Green's literary survey acknowledged that *For Heroes to Live In* was "based on close and accurate observation and recorded simply and naturally," but Green described the novel as flat and claimed that it seldom pierced "beneath the surface" (1048). Ewers had hoped that *Men Against the Earth* and *For Heroes to Live In* would form the first half of a tetralogy but the manuscript for the third book in the series, "The Paths of Morning," was rejected by his publisher Georgian House. Ewers admitted in a letter to teacher and poet Lyn Brown that he had "changed the point-of-view in the third and I think that mitigated against it. It broke the continuity" (Letter to Lyn Brown November 1972). "The Paths of Morning" has a marked shift in the tone compared to *Men Against the Earth* and *For Heroes to Live In* as it is a coming-of-age story rather than an insightful depiction of a rural community. Ewers' chagrin at the manuscript's failure was accentuated by the financial support he received to write it from a 1948 Commonwealth Literary Fund (CLF) grant. He stated that "the CLF grant in those days was £400! I'm one of the bad boys who didn't produce the goods" (Letter to Lyn Brown November 1972).

Ewers hoped that his attempts to engage readers with non-urban realities might contribute to a reduction in what he perceived as a pervasive disinterest in all that made the nation distinct. The suggestion that Australians should form a stronger connection with outback and rural landscapes, people and histories is evident in *The Great Australian Paradox*, where Ewers claimed that the population was "inhabiting a continent we do not know, and we do not know it because we are

not encouraged to know it” (10). He argued that Australian literature should assist the urbanised populace to gain a better understanding of themselves and the nation (9). Decades later Ewers continued to argue that Australian writers should focus on non-urban Australia. In *With the Sun On My Back* he suggested that “if our national vision is bounded by the limits of our mainland capitals, we are not worthy to have and to hold a vast continent in the challenge of this modern world” (142). The travel memoir made a concerted attempt to redress the imbalance by directing the attention of readers “to those portions of the continent which are almost completely beyond their conscious thoughts” (233). Indigenous culture was similarly viewed as deserving of more literary attention.

Ewers’ autobiography does not describe any extensive or regular contact with Aboriginal people, therefore most of his exposure to Aboriginal culture appears to have occurred during travels through remote or northern regions. Despite the brief amount of time he spent in the company of Aboriginal people, his fiction and non-fiction promoted a greater understanding of Indigenous culture. His 1935 *Walkabout* article “With the Mail to Marble Bar” encouraged readers to acknowledge the nation’s Indigenous heritage. He claimed that locations with Aboriginal nomenclature were “redolent of that other Australia which so few people know and which is really the most vital and the most characteristic part of it” (26). The same suggestion was made in “Discovering Australia Through Walkabout” where Ewers fore-grounded the importance of Indigenous culture by identifying “Aboriginal Ballet” (1947) and “Pukumani” (1948) as his most significant *Walkabout* contributions (46). Both articles present travel accounts that Ewers undertook solely to observe Indigenous dance and ceremony.

Two of Ewers' novels written decades apart also demonstrated his interest in Aboriginal culture. *Tales From The Dead Heart* is a children's fantasy novel that presented an Anglicised interpretation of Aboriginal myths. The main protagonist, an orphaned Aboriginal boy, lived independently on the fringe of his community. The young character was provided with emotional support and practical assistance by a talking snake, whose vast knowledge of Aboriginal culture eventually enabled the boy to assume a respected position in Aboriginal society. Ewers based his attempt to provide a convincing image of pre-white contact Aboriginal culture on *Savage Life in Central Australia* (1924), an anthropological text written by George Horne and George Aiston (*Long Enough* 242). *Who Rides on the River?* was also based on a textual source, in this instance one of Charles Sturt's expeditionary diaries which covered his explorations along the Murrumbidgee and Murray River systems in 1829. The introduction of the historical novel outlined Ewers' attempts to promote a plausible explanation for the lack of frontier conflict between Sturt's party and Aboriginal groups living along the rivers. *Who Rides on the River?* and *Tales From the Dead Heart* not only displayed Ewers' desire to educate readers concerning Indigenous culture, they demonstrated his unceasing endeavours to differentiate Australian culture and identity from British counterparts.

Ewers' introduction to G. V. Hubbles' *Modern Australian Fiction: A Bibliography 1940-1965* (1969) encouraged Australian writers to adopt themes that were "peculiarly Australian—that is, arise out of the fact that Australians are what they are, living where they live" ("Some Trends in Modern Australian Fiction" iv). He was an advocate for the further development of an Australian idiom and a greater engagement with national tropes. His awareness of the influence literature could exert on the reader's conception of place was apparent in the 1945 edition of

*Creative Writing in Australia*, which described the short history of Australian writing as “the story of a gradual process by which the values of life in Australia have been discerned and clarified” (119). The literary survey refuted suggestions that Australian writing was largely indistinct from English Literature (12). While the mid-twentieth-century academy had been slow to recognise Australian literature Ewers joined with other writers, teachers and critics working outside the academy to lobby for the inclusion of Australian writing into syllabi (Dale 189). Glen Phillips identifies *Creative Writing in Australia* as the first of its kind to support those undertaking a study of Australian literature (5).

Ewers’ continued support of Australian writing was apparent in his anthology *Modern Australian Short Stories* (1965) where he lauded the short story as a “virile feature of Australian writing” (ix). He claimed that the collection was initially well received but its sales greatly increased after it was adopted as a school text (“Interview by Shelley Balme” 55). The interest of schools in Australian writing was pleasing as he had spent decades advocating that readers and critics place a greater value on Australian literature. His efforts in this area were acknowledged, especially by other Western Australian writers. Fellow FAWWA president F. Bert Vickers stated that Ewers did much to preserve and promote Australian literature “so that it may have status in the land of its birth” (44). The writer Mary Durack, who also contributed to *Walkabout*, made note of the practical support Ewers offered other writers and his formidable knowledge of and enthusiasm for Australian writing (21).

Ewers’ promotion of Australian writing and the practical support he offered local writers ensured that he became an admired figure in the literary sphere. The *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* describes Ewers as “very much a

favourite son of his home State and one of its first writers to gain Australia-wide recognition” (“Ewers, J. K. (John Keith)” 244). A similar sentiment is evident in *The Ultimate Honesty* (1982), a collaborative celebration of Ewers and his writing by those who knew him and/or were influenced by his writing. The tributes it contains would have been well received by Ewers, who was dogged by a sense that he had not achieved his literary goals due to his teaching commitments and willingness to accept varied writing commissions (*Long Enough* 266; 268).

In 1947 Ewers took a leap of faith and resigned from teaching so he could be a full-time writer, yet the plan proved short lived as the temptation to accept part-time teaching positions proved too strong. His 1952 letter to Miles Franklin outlined that “putting one’s hand out for a cheque every second Thursday becomes a reflex reaction. It hurts when you stop doing it ... but I am hopeful of arranging a compromise” (Letter to Miles Franklin 1952). Unfortunately the compromise he desired was not forthcoming as he struggled to devote sufficient time to his writing career. His 1954 letter to writer Margaret Trist lamented that he had not written anything notable for two years due to the demands of a part-time teaching position (Letter to Margaret Trist 1954). In his autobiography Ewers admitted that he wondered

as I have often wondered since, whether my writing life has added up to anything really significant. I know it has been a life of unremitting effort, that it has at times taxed my strength and placed my health under strain.

Perhaps it has been too diversified. (*Long Enough* 268)

Despite Ewers’ self doubt and modesty, it is evident that he made a significant contribution to Western Australia’s literary scene and the promotion of Australia’s national literature. His writing influenced the national imaginary by encouraging

readers to connect with distinctly Australian landscapes and histories and to consider themselves to be “at home.”

### **At home**

In the mid-twentieth century many regarded Britain as the nation’s spiritual home. By the 1950s many young Australians embarked on European travels that adopted London as their base (Rickard 208). The trips offered new experiences and a cultural education. A reverence for British cultural symbols and institutions was widespread and resulted in many Australian cultural institutions being imitative and derivative (Curthoys, “We’ve Just Started” 71; Alomes 73). Ewers was unconvinced that Australian society and its cultural expressions were inherently inferior to British equivalents (*Long Enough* 185). He claimed that time spent living in England prior to World War II did not leave him with the impression that Britain was the Motherland (186). Instead the experience emphasised there was a clear difference between British and Australian people and culture. He encouraged writers to embrace all that made the nation and its writing distinct and applauded those who portrayed characters with a strong connection to Australian landscapes.

Ewers’ nationalist stance was evident in his praise for Katherine Susannah Prichard, whom he classified as an authentic Australian voice. He complimented her writing for being

born of the very blood-stream of Australian life. This is conveyed without any display of gum leaves and wattle, without any superficial stage trappings, but by an absolute immersion of the characters in their environment. The two are one. The people are real because they live and

breathe an atmosphere that is part of them. ("The Australian Bookman"  
May 1932 12)

This statement exemplified Ewers' unyielding support for the development of a distinct national literature that adopted Australian settings and characters whose strong sense of place suggested they were settled and "at home." Jane Mulcock notes the tendency of successive generations of white Australians to use a spiritual connection to land or place as a sign they are embedded and belong. While it is commonly believed that "when it comes to land, indigeneity begets belonging," the merging of the two concepts leads to slippages of meaning and conflicts between contesting definitions (63). Ewers adopted a simplistic acceptance of the link between a connection to place and belonging to encourage readers to imagine themselves as part of a settled and distinct population.

Ewers consistently privileged those who formed a connection to Australian environments. In the 1945 edition of *Creative Writing in Australia* he claimed that Australia's "un-English" surroundings should be cherished because this was the source of its people's identity. He claimed that the landscape

has already set its mark on the Australian people, so that they are no longer quite the same as the people of any other nation. This environment is twofold. It is on the one hand purely physical. On the other hand it is mental.  
(15)

The depiction of a deep connection to non-urban landscapes was a means of encouraging readers to reconsider the bonds of Empire and to value Australia's cultural expressions and distinct identity. This view was based on personal experience. His 1949 *Walkabout* article "In and Around Marble Bar" outlined the pseudo-spiritual connection he felt when travelling through remote regions:



There is, moreover, a mental as well as a physical quality inherent in a visit to those parts. There is the shedding of all the conventional routine of the south, the adjustment of mind ... there is a spiritual value, too, in the closeness with which one lives to the earth, especially if the trip is made overland with roadside camps and fireside yarns under the stars. (32)

Ewers' novels presented a number of characters who enjoyed a similar spiritual connection to non-urban environs. *Men Against The Earth*, *For Heroes to Live In* and *Fire on the Wind* resist Eurocentric definitions of home by embedding indigenised white characters in rural Australian landscapes.

*Men Against The Earth* and *For Heroes to Live In* placed a strong focus on the main female protagonist's connection to the landscape. Country born Avea Lea was "a girl who had lived close to the earth" (*For Heroes* 7). Her bond with the environment was an inseparable part of her being (168); she was at one with nature. In "The Paths of Morning" Avea was described as being so aware of "the wind about her, the earth beneath, she felt that she was part of something greater than herself ... the earth cried out to her, the grasses spoke to her, the sky became articulate. That was her strength" (470). Her connection to the land meant that while she rejoiced in life she accepted death and hardship as a natural component of the lifecycle (*For Heroes* 46). Ewers depicted an awareness and understanding of the environment as enriching and fortifying, which unsettled the notion that Anglo-Australians needed to connect with their British roots to gain a similar result.

Avea's strong sense of place set her apart from other members of rural communities who fought against the environment rather than becoming enmeshed within it. She was

so completely a part of this world that every one of its seasonal moods found a response in her. Man was a part of it, but he counted only so far as he existed in harmony with it. When he transgressed against nature's law, there was a discord. But, the harmony of nature was everlasting! (468)

Ewers encouraged the reader to re-imagine what it meant to be an Australian with a strong sense of belonging and connection to place. Hughes-d'Aeth notes the writer's engagement with the bond between man and environment. Ewers presented farming in the south-west of Western Australia as a lifestyle that fostered an intimacy with nature ("The Shadow on the Field" 59). Avea's connection to the land is presented as an ideal to which others aspired.

In the post-World War I period Danny desired to replicate Avea's bond with nature (*For Heroes* 12). He realised that in comparison to the unspoilt young woman he was

only partly aware of the earth. He was used to the city and suburbs where they covered the earth with gravel and bitumen, planted houses in neat rows, setting them about with lawns and ornamental trees, until life seemed several removes from the elemental soil. True, the bush was never far distant ... [but the city] wasn't land you could live off. (15)

Urban landscapes were not considered authentic representations of the nation due to their inherent artificiality; carefully formed suburbs were negatively depicted as a subsuming force that distorted signs of the "real" Australia. The focus which the two novels placed on the domestic sphere and their portrayal of an urban/country divide was in part a response to global warfare and economic hardship.

After two world wars, an economic depression and a disconcerting awareness of regional vulnerability, the nation's confidence in the powers of the

old democratic order was undermined (Lever 498). An increasing number were dispirited with the Anglo-centric status quo. Stephen Alomes claims that idyllic picture-theatre visions of rural Australia provided a sense of solace that transcended urban corruption (70). *For Heroes to Live In* demonstrated this trend. Danny returned from World War I a changed man. The teacher turned his back on his career and urban society as he sought healing from war-induced psychological wounds. He was attracted to farming because he wanted to be immersed in what he viewed as a wholesome environment (20). The novel adopted a common view that rural landscapes and lifestyles offered a panacea for the ills of modern life (Schama 7). In *For Heroes to Live In* Danny was drawn to Avea because he wanted to emulate her ability to draw “sustenance for both body and soul” from the land (15).

Danny recognised that the success of his farming venture would be dependent on local knowledge and labour. The practical assistance Avea could offer ensured that she was viewed as a desirable marriage partner; she was an eminently capable and dependable country girl whose knowledge of farming methods exceeded that of many men in the local community. Ewers presented Avea as the indigenised inhabitant and Danny as the coloniser who needed to utilise Indigenous inhabitants for his benefit. The dependence of settler Australians on Indigenous labour and knowledge had previously been recognised by Ewers in “With the Mail to Marble Bar.” This *Walkabout* article provided an account of a journey Ewers undertook through the north of Western Australia. An accompanying photograph depicted a group of Aboriginal stockmen and bore the caption: “The white man is under an obligation to his expert native stockmen, without whose assistance it would be difficult to operate the enormous stations in out-back Australia” (29). Ewers may or may not have been involved in the

selection of the photo or its caption but the observation had also been made in a number of his other *Walkabout* articles.

Ewers' 1935 article "Over Madman's Track to Broome" recounted his visit to a large and remote station at Anna Plains. The station was dependent on an Aboriginal workforce to assist three white stockmen to manage one million acres and fifteen thousand cattle (31). *For Heroes to Live In* highlighted that the presence of a willing Indigenous workforce did not always ensure the success of white pastoral endeavours. Danny's fate mirrored that of many settlers whose failed pastoral enterprises and tragic deaths were the consequences of an inability to understand the local environment and thrive in a frequently harsh, unpredictable and unyielding landscape.

Danny struggled to master the complexities of wheat farming during a time of drought. In comparison Avea was represented as an idealised version of an "earth mother" or a wise and sensitive custodian of the landscape. She advised Danny to embrace traditional farming methods that were sympathetic to the environment (131-32), but as his sense of anxiety rose Danny rejected her advice and was persuaded by others to adopt modern and expensive farming practices. Avea was highly critical of these methods because she believed they were unsympathetic to the landscape and forced the earth to yield its bounty while causing environmental degradation (141 ). Hughes-d'Aeth agrees with this image as he argues that "wheat farming was the cause of the destruction of most of the ecological fabric of south-western Australia" ("The Shadow on the Field" 59). Avea predicted that farmers such as Danny, who were seduced by modern machinery and their promises of easy rewards, would fail despite their misguided

belief that they were “the lords of creation who made themselves masters of the earth” (*For Heroes* 168).

A similar view was apparent in “The Paths of Morning” where men who viewed the environment only in terms of its commercial value were described as setting themselves against nature and as becoming agents of destruction (469). Ewers’ 1949 *Walkabout* article “The Kimberleys: A National Responsibility” reinforced this image by recounting the statement of a Kimberly resident who suggested that pastoral and other industries suffered as a direct consequence of their “policy of taking everything out of [the land] and putting little back” (14). The outcome of these measures was dire in Ewers’ wheat-belt novels. Avea had seen first-hand that chaos and destruction were the result of greed, selfishness and a desire to dominate the landscape (“The Paths of Morning” 469). Danny’s inability to nurture his land into yielding good wheat crops led to his descent into depression, madness and death; a fate that was depicted as the ultimate price paid by those who corrupted “nature’s laws” (*For Heroes* 169). The novel suggested those who were not connected to a landscape they understood and sought to protect, were in danger of being destroyed by their ignorance and/or arrogance.

The depiction of the unforgiving nature of the Australian landscape contained in *For Heroes to Live In* was a recurring theme in Ewers’ *Walkabout* articles. “Over Madman’s Track to Broome” presented remote regions as inherently deceptive and treacherous places (29). The hallucinations and mental torment Danny experienced prior to his death in *For Heroes to Live In* were reminiscent of events depicted in Ewers’ 1936 *Walkabout* article “Water in the Desert.” Men who embarked on a futile battle against the landscape were described as psychologically tormented: “tragedy stalked through the desert, and the

shimmering mirage lured the gasping fossicker towards certain death” (38). Ewers’ fiction and non-fiction issued a warning to those who failed to respect the environment and gained a false sense of security from their positions of power in white society.

Richard Nile examined the exclusive and hierarchical nature of mid-twentieth-century Australia which had long resulted in the exclusion of Aborigines and women from “nationalist interpretations of Australia” (“Introduction” 1). Ewers’ wheat-belt novels imagined a society that afforded women greater opportunities to contribute to the national story. He was an atypical writer in a period in which gender inequality can be mapped throughout fiction (Ferrier 209), as he adopted a female main protagonist who exhibited a knowledge of farming practices and the environment that exceeded that of male characters. After the death of Avea’s husband in *For Heroes to Live In* she refused to embrace a traditional gender role and be controlled and contained by her male dominated community. She withstood pressure to assume the socially acceptable mantle of widowhood which required her to sell the farm and leave the district, and believed herself capable of running a farm in an independent capacity. Ewers’ awareness of a gender bias was evident in his 1935 *Walkabout* article “Yandying for Tin at Moolyella,” where he highlighted the physical labour undertaken by a group of Aboriginal women who were subjugated both by a group of Aboriginal men and male-dominated white society. His fiction and non-fiction demonstrated an interest in those who occupied marginalised positions within contemporary Australian society, for example women and Aborigines.

Ewers’ wheat-belt novels made little reference to Indigenous groups who were dispossessed by expanding settlements. *Men Against the Earth* presented a

brief episode from Avea's childhood where she encountered descendants of the region's first inhabitants. In contrast to her overtly racist father (2), Avea was not repulsed by the Aborigines (51). She felt empathy for those whose connection to country had been disrupted and whose presence had been erased from the landscape. Curthoys argues that an Indigenous invisibility formed an integral part of the power of the Aboriginal figure ("Mythologies" 29). Ewers' indigenised main protagonist ensured that *Men Against the Earth* and *For Heroes to Live In* contributed to a discourse in which the absent Aboriginal figure formed a powerful literary device (Huggan 25). This characterisation also illustrated Ewers' nuanced engagement with what Nile termed as a deep-seated sense of illegitimacy "at the heart of settler Australian anxieties" ("Civilisation" 48).

Issues of belonging and home also resonated in *Fire on the Wind*. Ewers presented a clear sense of difference between those who formed a close connection to non-urban environs and those who were intimidated by the power of nature. Alan Lawson notes similar attempts of postcolonial writers to present characters who bear a closer resemblance to the nation's Indigenous inhabitants than members of mainstream society (28). Characters who felt a sense of belonging in a rural or bush environment in *Fire on the Wind* were resilient in the face of natural disaster. While other members of the small farming community were rendered fearful and powerless by the impending threat of bushfire, characters whose sense of self was coupled to the land were calm. The novel challenged the reader to consider what it meant to be a settled white inhabitant.

The love interest of one of the main protagonist's sisters, Matt Westergard, is an example of an overtly indigenised character. Although Matt lived most of the year in the city, he regularly returned to the farming district in which he was raised

to reconnect with the landscape that continued to dominate his sense of home (*Fire on the Wind* 118). He cherished the episodes of his childhood that were spent wandering bush tracks and learning the secrets of the bush, “studying the birds and animals and dreaming as he lay face down on the cool, damp earth, dreams entirely disconnected with his subsequent experiences” (148). The reference to dreaming emphasised that Matt drew strength from an Aboriginal-styled connection to country. In the face of an oncoming bushfire that threatened to destroy the whole community, Matt retreated to the bush which throbbed with the intensity of life:

Life was everywhere, and the visible was only the tiniest fraction of the whole. It was the unseen that stirred him, the cicadae, the movement of the sap in the scrub ... Even the earth gave off a scent pregnant with the life force. It hung heavily about them, filling their nostrils, a cool, damp smell of decaying leaves, a smell of birth as well as of death, of seeds bursting, of young shoots thrusting upwards, of old trees dying, of leaves returning to the mould. And they were in this, and part of it. (150)

Rather than cower in the face of death, Matt calmly and philosophically thought of the impermanence of it all. This cool, dark smell told of death ... the abundant growth of fern and shrub, had an inevitable and natural decay, death through misadventure, through the struggle of living or through sudden and unforeseen disaster, would come to each in its turn. (151)

His remarkable resilience in the face of death was due to the recognition and acceptance of the fragile position of humans in the Australian landscape. Matt was not an alien inhabitant of an unfamiliar and intimidating landscape, instead he felt at ease and at home in the landscape even when it was a hostile space. Ewers



contrasted Matt's outlook with that of the urban population who were fearful of the power of nature.

Despite their distance from the bushfire the metropolitan population of *Fire on the Wind* feared the world that lay beyond the suburbs. Ewers suggested that city inhabitants were happy to benefit from harnessing natural resources but they built stout homes so they might cluster together for protection, "hold nature at bay" and "present a united face to the vast power which they could never thoroughly control" (151). The novel encouraged readers to shift their gaze from urban scenes and connect with the Australian environment. Ewers' depiction of Aboriginal culture's connection to country illustrated that bonds between Indigenous people and the land could be expanded to include white Australians, as "the union between Black and White and the spirit of the land itself is seen as beneficial to all three" ("Aboriginal in White Australian Literature" 8). It was not surprising that a writer who consistently portrayed a relationship between people and country, and who encouraged writers to embrace distinctly Australian tropes, supported the Jindyworobak movement. Michael Ackland claims that the Jindyworobak group formed by Rex Ingamells in 1937 attempted to "wed white and black traditions to produce a unique Australian civilisation" (89). While this was not a realistic aim, Ackland suggests that one of the group's positive achievements was the manner in which their strong nationalist focus "re-actualised debate on Indigenous culture" (89).

Ewers was an outspoken supporter of the endeavours of the Jindyworobak movement. F. Bert Vickers realised this at a FAWWA meeting when he mustered the courage to challenge Ewers' position. Vickers recalls that Ewers speedily and unequivocally dismissed his objections and "dressed me down good and proper,

taking good care to show me my ignorance” (43). Many are rightly critical of the Jindyworobak’s engagement with Indigenous culture. Geoffrey Bolton argues that the movement “sought a little too self-consciously, to graft Aboriginal imagery onto the writing of contemporary verse” (4). Ewers adopted a more subtle approach. By focusing on a specific aspect of Indigenous culture he promulgated the image of a distinct nation in which white and black inhabitants could gain a legitimate sense of being at home. Ewers’ writing reflected Nile’s claim that we are “most assuredly, the creators of our traditions. Our storylines are what we choose them to be” (“Introduction” 7). The stories of place that Ewers presented were a blend of Indigenous and settler traditions that resisted the dominance of pseudo-British cultural constructs.

White claims that the question of Australia’s identity “has usually been seen as a tug-of-war between Australianness and Britishness, between the impulse to be distinctively Australian and the lingering sense of a British heritage” (*Inventing Australia* 47). Ewers’ *Walkabout* articles acknowledged the tensions caused by the continued veneration of British definitions of home. His 1938 *Walkabout* article “The Wildflowers of Western Australia” noted the scant recognition and value ascribed to the nation’s abundance of spectacular and unique flora. Ewers was incredulous to hear an Australian writer tell a British audience there were “no flowers in Australia ... Instead of flowers there are flocks of brightly coloured galahs and cockatoos, which fleck the earth with their bright plumage” (17). This statement may have been facetious but it was particularly jarring to a writer who had developed a keen interest in native flora during his childhood bush rambles, and who abhorred the willingness of Australians to classify their culture and landscapes as inherently inferior to British equivalents.

Ewers developed an interest in native flora in his youth. In “The Wildflowers of Western Australia” he stated that “as youngsters we roamed Perth’s encircling bush in search of our favourite flowers” (14). Native wildflowers reminded the writer of home. He believed he was one of many who had formed a connection to local flora, claiming that the “seasonal display of wildflowers has gradually seeped into the consciousness of Western Australians. It has become part of their very being” (16). The promotion of a localised connection to place emphasised the nation’s distance from the Imperial centre. Ewers’ writing resisted a general willingness to denigrate or suppress the nation’s unique identity and culture (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 9). He actively encouraged readers to do the same by reconsidering accepted notions regarding home.

Ewers 1936 *Walkabout* article “Spinifex” claimed that the time was right to challenge dominant constructs and ideologies: “This is an age of debunking. The present generation is prompt to dethrone old idols and establish new. Similarly, ancient prejudices are attacked vigorously and subjected to the searchlight of truth” (35). “Discovering Australia Through Walkabout” embraced this ideal by attempting to turn the reader’s focus from the international to the domestic sphere. Ewers claimed that the global turmoil of the 1930s facilitated an “extraordinary re-awakening of interest in things Australian” (44). He suggested this awareness might gain pace if Australians became better informed about their nation. *Walkabout* was identified as a publication that could play an integral role in this educative process because Ewers claimed it “enabled me to get to know my own country” (47). While English middlebrow writing is described by Rosa Maria Bracco as playing an important role in supporting dominant British values (5), Ewers attempted to engage his readers in a re-evaluation of the nation’s

Eurocentric bias by encouraging them to seek a greater exposure to distinctly Australian landscapes and cultures. Travel could provided readers with the inspiration to develop a connection to the environment, or as Nile suggested, to think themselves into place (“Civilisation” 57).

Ewers’ writing depicted domestic travel through non-urban regions as a means of forming a connection to place. His 1949 *Walkabout* article “Six Hundred Miles of Wildflowers” described a driving vacation through the Western Australian countryside that revealed a landscape magically transformed by a profusion of flowers. The article encouraged others to undertake similar trips:

Soon after I reached Perth from Carnarvon I was urging on a businessman the wisdom of making a winter or spring-time holiday at that northern port on the Gascoyne ... the trip by road, although it may take three days, is such a rich experience that the journey by modern air-transport seems worthless in comparison. (28)

Ewers was critical of those who were insular in their outlooks due to a reluctance to undertake journeys through unfamiliar locations (*Long Enough* 186). Travel was depicted as an experience that could expand and challenge the individual’s world view.

Ewers’ 1950 *Walkabout* article “The Trans-Australian Railway” also presented domestic travel as a stimulating and educative experience. The journey by train between the west and east coasts revealed “to strangers and to city-bound Australians alike an impression of the vastness of the continent” (33). Ewers argued that the crossing left no doubt that Australia was “a timeless land, with secrets that she does not reveal, except to those who seek with wisdom and understanding” (33). He promoted the classic image of the dry and stark outback

but he also encouraged the vicarious traveller to view Australia as more than a land of red dust and gumtrees. His 1951 *Walkabout* article “The City of Cairns” described the tropical city as “one place in Australia which all Australians should visit, if only to discover for themselves that this other world—this world without the domination of the gum-tree and the wattle—really does exist within the geographical limits of their continent” (17). This statement inferred that the acquisition of knowledge would uncover a level of incongruity in readers’ assumptions concerning the nation.

This view was evident in Ewers’ 1949 *Walkabout* article “Derby” which compared the Australian town with its English namesake:

Whoever named Derby after an erstwhile Secretary of State for the Colonies either had no imagination or else conceived it as a prodigious joke. If the latter, then the Australian habit of reducing things to their proper level promptly turned the joke back on the joker. (38)

Ewers portrayed Australian culture and society as dissimilar from their British counterparts. He claimed that “it is as well to leave any preconceptions about Derby behind you when you visit it ... top hats and morning coats are transmuted into khaki drabs and an easy friendship that overrides colour, class and creed” (38). Difference was further emphasised by the town’s social hierarchy.

The patriarch of Australia’s Derby was a Chinese man called Owen Ah Chee rather than a gentrified Englishman. To emphasise the point of difference Ewers noted that Ah Chee was married to an Aboriginal woman and described the mixed-race community as a “working homogeneity” (39). The article rejected what Rose describes as a fixed socio-centric British version of home that brought the full force of the category “lower” “to bear in defining Australia” (43). “Derby”

challenged colonial notions of class and power via the suggestion that Australian society should not be judged according to British ideals. This was a bold step to make in the post-World War II period when racial tensions were heightened due to an increase in immigration from a greater number of countries, but Ewers was unapologetic in his attempts to persuade readers to develop an appreciation for the realities of non-urban Australian life. Reading was viewed as an activity (Humble 42), an intellectual process requiring participation rather than a passive means of consuming literary entertainment. Ewers' writing indicates that he was aware that reading was not simply a source of entertainment, it was also a means of engaging with identity.

Ewers' commentary on transplanted British visions of home was consistent. His 1938 *Walkabout* article "Cattle Chosen" recounted the difficulties faced by a family of English immigrants who went to great lengths to transform a section of bushland into an English-styled garden. Ewers acknowledged the desire of settler families to apply British standards to their new lives in Australia as "naturally enough, the early pioneer lived in a world of 'home' standards" (22), however, he made it clear that it was time for successive generations of a maturing nation to shift their gaze away from Britain. This view was also inferred in Ewers' 1939 *Walkabout* article "The First Fairbridge Farm School" which disparaged the continued adoption of British housing styles that were not well-matched to hot southern climes. Houses that were ill-suited to the climate were described as unsightly and uncomfortable structures in the landscape (34). Both articles demonstrated Ewers' desire for readers to embed their concept of home in an Australian rather than a British context.

Ewers depicted the continued adoption of British nomenclature as evidence of discord in the sense of place of many Australians. Ewers claims that in his youth he was surprised to hear the inhabitants of a new housing development situated on Perth's urban fringe had collectively chosen "Carlisle" for the suburb's name. This area was neatly eked out of a scrubby bush landscape and was the antithesis of the British landscape to which the name referred. Ewers claimed that the name was ridiculous because the location could not have been "more un-English" (*Long Enough* 29). While he did not provide an alternative he lamented the community's veneration of British ideals and their apparent unwillingness to embrace an Australian identity. The vignette supported Henry Reynolds' claim that the adoration of British culture "promised to condemn us to perpetual provincialism—to endlessly adopt last year's fashions, discarded designs, tired ideas; always to live a derivative, second-hand life" (*Why Weren't We Told* 22). Ewers was dogged in his determination to expose conflicting visions of home and to find in favour of those that were uniquely Australian. *Fire on the Wind* and *Money Street* applauded the tendency of Australia's youth to place a greater value on Australian cultural forms than older generations.

The contrasting views of different generations in *Money Street* challenged the nation's ties to the Imperial centre. A reverence for British history, culture and landscapes was portrayed by one of the street's elderly residents who had long dreamt of travelling to Europe. On this character's arrival in England he immediately gained the sense that he had arrived home. His sense of connection to Britain was so strong that he felt like a "child meeting its parent for the first time" (382). The elderly man chose to forgo further European travels so he could remain in a place that felt familiar and comfortable. This character's veneration of Britain

was in stark contrast with that of *Money Street*'s main protagonist Elman Day, a young ex-serviceman whose relationship with the motherland was dominated by negative war-time experiences.

The fulfilment of Day's duty to the British Empire had come at a high personal cost. His leg had been amputated and he was facing a difficult future as he was dependent on a war-service pension, which Ewers described as a meagre recompense "by which a grateful nation sought to honour its debt to him for his wrecked manhood" (337). The main protagonist did not express any desire to reconnect with Britain. Instead, at the novel's conclusion he effected a personal retreat from Empire by choosing to establish his home close to the Australian bush (192). The marked disparity between an old man's long held dreams and Day's life experience emphasised the difference between the old and new worlds. Ewers encouraged his readers to set aside nostalgic sentiment and examine the nation's relationship with Britain.

In order to achieve this aim in *Money Street* Ewers situated the most significant episodes of Day's post-war life in a bush setting. Day formed a pseudo-spiritual connection to the bush when he was exposed to nature in all its fury on a camping trip. Disaster struck when Day and a friend became hopelessly lost in dense scrub during a bushfire (367). The friend was killed but the injured Day was rescued by a hermit priest and nursed back to health in his bush hut. Dystopia was transformed into utopia when Day's experience proved so cathartic that he chose to establish his new life in a bush setting. The sense of solace that Day developed in the bush, despite its many dangers, projected a sense of disillusionment in Western Europe and an awareness of fading imperial certainties (Macintyre 156).



Day's willingness to embrace all that Australia had to offer illustrated Isabel Hofmeyer's claim that "fiction provides a laboratory in which landscapes can be used as arenas for the display of, and experimentation with, particular identities" (134). *Money Street* negatively critiqued Australia's readiness to adopt the status of a inferior nation-state and allow its youth to be led into war waged on a horrific scale. Day's retreat to the Australian bush illustrated Ewers' resistance of the nation's cultural subservience. Ewers appears to have been aware that writing was able to, in the words of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, initiate "shifts in critical taste and cultural stance" (132). His fiction consistently unsettled British-based conceptions of home.

Ewers' exploration of the competing images of home held by successive generations in *Money Street* was repeated in *Fire on the Wind*. The settler community in *Fire on the Wind* was described as containing "a goodly amount of English sentiment" (176). This ensured that conflict arose when the Australian-born adult children of two British immigrants rejected the transplanted values and norms accepted by their parents. The siblings were depicted as members of a generation that "knew none other than the southern suns, the southern sights and sounds" (176). They considered themselves to be at home and did not yearn for a distant motherland or express a sense of cultural inferiority. The historical novel challenged the continued willingness of contemporary society to refer to Britain as home (Nile, "Civilisation" 50). If middlebrow fiction appealed to moderately educated readers seeking to become more cultured through their reading (Casey 28), it could be used by nationalist writers such as Ewers as a means of encouraging enquiring readers to examine accepted cultural conventions.

Ewers' personal experience revealed the influence literature could exert on a reader's world view. He admitted that as a young writer he had avidly read "every Australian book I could afford to buy or manage to borrow" (*Long Enough* 116). This reading material inspired Ewers to undertake an extensive holiday through remote locations (141), and it ensured that regions he visited for the first time appeared strangely familiar (*With the Sun* 19). The ability of literature to transform a reader's sense of self and nation was examined by White, who suggested that Australia has "long supported a whole industry of image-makers to tell us what we are" (*Inventing Australia* viii). Ewers was eager to adopt the role of image maker as his writing examined the questions: Who are we and where are we? His response suggested that if the population connected with the Australian environment and Indigenous culture they would not view themselves as descendants of transplanted British colonials living in a threatening or foreign landscape. Instead, they would consider themselves to be Australians who were "at home."

### **A cultural education**

Ewers' adoption of an Aboriginal-styled connection to country was a means of Indigenising white characters, but his interest in Indigenous culture was not always calculated to benefit mainstream society. His fiction and non-fiction frequently advocated for a marked improvement in the lack of knowledge concerning Indigenous people, history and culture as this was a means of reducing racial discrimination. This view was evident in "The Trans-Australian Railway" where Ewers recounted the racist reactions of fellow passengers who came into contact with Aborigines at a remote train stop:

It was interesting to watch the reactions of the white passengers—particularly the women—to these original inhabitants of the land. Many of them had probably not seen a blackfellow before, and I doubt whether any of them were conversant with the history and traditions of these dark-skinned people. Their obvious revulsion at this unnatural proximity of a primitive race would have been amusing, had it not been tragic. (33)

Ewers was disappointed in the paternalistic behaviour of the passengers, claiming he “had been led to expect that this group of desert blacks was a disgrace to the white civilisation that had supplanted them. But I was rather pleasantly surprised by what I saw” (33). This view was emphasised by an interaction between two passengers and an Aboriginal souvenir seller.

Ewers empathised with an Aboriginal man who was taken advantage of by a pair of arrogant passengers who failed to pay an appropriate sum for carved wooden souvenirs. As the train departed a final souvenir was taken from the Aborigine who ran alongside the departing train. As a meagre payment was dismissively flung at the Aborigines’ feet the

old blackfellow, still jog-trotting, saw it with a downward glance of his eyes. In that brief glance he recognised its worthlessness, but his face betrayed no resentment. He gradually slowed down, his eyes fixed hopefully upon the white man to whom he had handed his kangaroo. Apparently, the fellow’s conscience troubled him, for he fumbled in his pocket and produced a penny! (33)

This racist display left Ewers wondering “what a white man would have said and done had he been similarly treated” (33). It also revealed an undercurrent of anxiety generated by the marginalisation of the Indigenous population. The levels of

disadvantage that many Aborigines faced was also noted in “Over Madman’s Track to Broome” where Ewers described the scant provisions metered out to Aborigines at an outback depot as the sorry “dispensations of a white man’s Government to the people whose continent he has appropriated” (31). Both articles displayed the need for an improvement in the treatment of Indigenous people but the pace of social change was slow.

“The Trans-Australian Railway” showed that little had changed since 1935 when Ewers’ *Walkabout* article “The Sea Hath its Pearls” highlighted the willingness of sections of the population to disparage marginalised cultures. Ewers’ travel account claimed that a white owner of a pearl lugger claimed he would rather face bankruptcy than work on his boat and live in close confines with men of other races (12). The deeply ingrained nature of racism during the mid-twentieth century was on full display in Ewers’ writing, but so too was the suggestion that readers should seek a greater understanding of Aboriginal culture and people.

In his travel memoir *With The Sun On My Back* Ewers suggested that the topic of racial inclusion should be introduced to discussions concerning Aboriginal disadvantage:

If the inherent difficulties involved are to be reduced to the absolute minimum it follows that, in addition to the granting of full citizen rights, no effort must be spared to enable these coloured people to take their place in the community on terms of absolute equality with the whites. (168)

This was a bold claim to make in a society that subscribed to a racial hierarchy in which Western Europeans reigned supreme, yet Ewers stated that a move towards racial inclusion would directly benefit the white population:

The entry of the aborigine into the social and cultural stream of white society can, in the long run, mean nothing less than the enrichment of the national life of Australia. By refusing to admit him as a fellow citizen we not only debase him, we debase and impoverish ourselves. (*With The Sun* 220)

In order to shift race relations to a more equal footing, Ewers' writing advocated for a marked improvement in the level of knowledge concerning Indigenous people and culture. "Aboriginal Ballet" and "Pukumani" display Ewers' desire to learn more about Aboriginal culture, but they also engaged with the complexities and ambiguities that dominated Australia's race relations.

Ewers admitted in "Aboriginal Ballet" that he sometimes ascribed to dominant notions of Aboriginal inferiority. For example prior to undertaking a long journey to northern Australia for a *Walkabout* assignment concerning Aboriginal dance, the writer wondered whether this "was a long journey to make with, perhaps, a dubious reward" (29). He was concerned that the cultural practices he would soon witness might simply reveal Aboriginal ceremonial practices to be "rather weird and fantastic" (29), however, these concerns were soon expunged. After his first encounter with Wargaitj people who lived on a reserve at Delissaville near Darwin, Ewers declared he was

strangely moved by what I had seen; and that wasn't how I expected to feel after watching the dancing of an illiterate and primitive people. The whole thing was so like a theatrical performance, so rich in choreographic detail, such a curious blending of drama and comedy, that I could not think of them as ritual dances. (33)

“Aboriginal Ballet” demonstrated that Ewers did not shy away from confronting racial prejudice. The personal experiences outlined in the article suggested that travel might lead others to the realisation that notions of Aboriginal inferiority could easily be refuted.

Ewers’ companion during the journey outlined in “Aboriginal Ballet” was the acclaimed and widely travelled American dance expert Ted Shawn. The expedition was the realisation of Shawn’s long held desire to witness Aboriginal dance. The experience did not disappoint. Shawn lauded the dances of the Wargaitj people: “I can say without hesitation that, of all primitive dancing I have seen, the dancing of the Wargaitj which I have witnessed to-night is the best—bar none” (33). He described the skills of some of the Indigenous dancers as world class and suggested that several of the dancers “would be a sensation in London or New York” (33). The international dance authority declared Aboriginal choreography to be “beyond the primitive” due to its complexity and similarity to western dance methods (34). Ewers was certainly not a dance expert but he agreed that “the dancing of these men is something far more than a mere savage impulse” (34).

Ewers was clearly moved by the dance and the “songs of an ancient people, who for a brief time revealed to us white men of a different civilisation a glimpse of the art which is part of their life and ceremonial” (34). While he continued to apply the descriptor “primitive” to Aboriginal culture in the article, he also engaged with the notion that Aboriginal culture was not inherently inferior. Racial ambiguity was also evident in the article’s title. “Aboriginal Ballet” might be interpreted as a suggestion that Aboriginal dance was a parody of a superior European dance form that epitomised elite culture, or it might suggest that Indigenous dance was comparable to elite European forms. As Ewers’ conception

of Aboriginal ceremony shifted it appeared that the latter option was seriously considered.

A fascination with Aboriginal ceremony began soon after the establishment of white settlement (Bruce and Callaway 87). The level of curiosity concerning Indigenous culture was usually superficial. Anna Haebich and Jodie Taylor suggest that settler “encounters with Aboriginal performance have manifested primarily in spectatorship rather than interaction” (63). The initial purpose of the journey presented in “Aboriginal Ballet” was to simply observe and document the exotic Other, but by the end of Ewers’ outback journey he was less focused on spectatorship and viewed the experience as an invaluable opportunity to gain an insight into Aboriginal culture. The *Walkabout* article also reflected the intensification of interest in Indigenous dance during the mid-twentieth century.

During this period interest in Aboriginal culture became more sophisticated and nuanced. Shawn was one of a number of dance pioneers who studied ways in which Indigenous dance had “the potential to create profound experiences for performers and audiences” (Haebich and Taylor 68). The group’s interest in dance and ethnomusicology led to attempts to transform modern notions of dance by creating new dance languages and idioms from Indigenous forms (68). These dancers were not mere observers: they hoped their choreography would be infused by their exposure to Indigenous dance. The two “Corroboree” ballets set to John Anthill’s musical score were noted examples of mid-twentieth-century Australian productions that consciously blended classical ballet and Aboriginal dance (Card 42). Beth Dean choreographed the 1954 version that premiered during the Australian tour of Queen Elizabeth II.

Before choreographing the ballet Dean and her husband Victor Carell embarked on a ten thousand mile, eight month research trip through the Northern Territory and Central Australia. The pair published their account in a travel memoir *Dust For the Dancers* (1955) and Dean shared her experiences in the 1955 *Walkabout* article “In Search of Stone-Age Dance.” During their travels the pair recorded Aboriginal music, collected Indigenous artefacts (Card 43) and made as comprehensive a study as possible of the dance ceremonies of the Australian aborigines. These last remnants of stone-age man have a rich ceremonial life filled with poetry and high artistry. Their chanted literature culminates in dance dramas of both lyric grace and stark angularity. These dance dramas cover the whole of their social, economic and religious life. (Dean 15)

The experience inspired the duo to reveal an under-valued facet of Indigenous culture to a wide audience.

Dean and Carell’s research trip revealed “far more exciting steps and much more variety of movement than we had anticipated” (*Dust For the Dancers* 208).

They hoped the ballet might

instil the depth and potent emotional beauty of aboriginal dance into people who had never even seen an aborigine; to try to enthuse their will to picture in the mirror of their minds the excitement of an aboriginal ceremony which they had never known even existed. (209)

The pair’s hopes were realised as the ballet was noted for exuding a sense of cultural integrity which differentiated it from Rex Reid’s 1950 version (Potter 17).

The admiration Dean developed for the technical skills exhibited by Aboriginal dancers was evident in her 1955 *Walkabout* article, where she positively compared



Indigenous dance to Spanish dancing and classical ballet (17). What fascinated her most of all was the connection between Indigenous dance and culture.

The element of Indigenous dance that was of particular interest to Dean was the relationship between Aboriginal dance and the transmission of history and culture. She admired the manner in which dance was an integral and multifaceted component of the Indigenous way of life: “To them [dance] is a pageant, a religion, a discipline, and a way of teaching the history of the totem” (Dean 20). Her 1962 letter to the Australian Ballet’s Artistic Director Peggy Van Praagh stated that

Aborigines live a very human and emotional experience through their ceremonial. Theirs is a living theatre of great artistry. In their interpretation of the magnificent “dreamtime” ancestral beings, we saw intricate costumes of great beauty and highly imaginative movements. (Letter to Van Praagh)

In *Walkabout* Dean described her observations of the intimate relationship between Indigenous song, dance, spirituality and culture as “rare and unbelievably satisfying” (20). She successfully portrayed these aspects of Indigenous culture in her choreography as critics noted that the ballet “successfully crossed those boundaries between the distinctive and the universal ... Its Aboriginality gave it a distinctively Australian flavour” (Card 43).

Representations of aspects of Indigenous culture for entertainment purposes can be viewed either as positive exposure or exploitation. Dean’s ballet revealed the period’s increasingly complex engagement with Indigenous culture, albeit for a variety of reasons: educational, artistic, political, altruistic and commercial (Haebich and Taylor 68). *Walkabout*’s interest in educating its readers concerning Indigenous culture was apparent in a 1965 letter from editor Brian McArdle to Carell in which he stated he was interested in a

story dealing with what you discovered on your recent visit to New Guinea ... I feel sure you must have lots of material from your earlier researches into aboriginal dancing which could also provide us with more *Walkabout* articles. (Letter to Victor Carell)

A letter sent the following year from McArdle's assistant Angela Wawn to Carell claimed that the editor was willing to consider Dean's proposed article on the importance of dance and dance style (Letter to Victor Carell). The letters demonstrated a shift in focus from the documentation of spectacle towards a more nuanced engagement with Indigenous culture.

Ewers was not a dance expert but he was intrigued by Aboriginal ceremony and dance. Bill Harney acted as a guide for Ewers and Shawn on their trip to Delissaville, after which he convinced Ewers to accompany him on an impromptu side trip to Melville Island to observe ceremonies performed during the dry season. The Indigenous mourning traditions, funereal ceremonies, costumes and dance that Ewers witnessed were recounted in "Pukumani." The absence of Shawn on this journey was apparent in a marked decrease in Ewers' description and evaluation of the ceremonies and dancers.

"Pukumani" contained widely divergent depictions of Indigenous culture, some were sensitive but others were racist. The paternalistic references it contained reflected dominant notions of Aboriginal inferiority. For example, Ewers described his Aboriginal guides as superstitious and lazy after they expressed a reluctance to make camp on a site they believed was tainted by death. Ewers unsympathetically dismissed the guides' fears: "It was the first time I had ever known blacks to be reluctant about lowering their swags ... They got over their fright subsequently, but for a while their faces showed that they feared the white man was taking

unnecessary risks” (32). This incident was offset by Ewers’ acknowledgement that he was deeply touched by his interactions with Islander people. After providing assistance to Indigenous mourners whose status prevented them feeding themselves, he stated that “it was my privilege on a number of occasions to hold a mug of tea or a crust of bread to the lips of one of these people” (29). Contrasting views concerning Aboriginal people and culture in “Pukumani” highlighted the complexities inherent in making value judgements about another culture.

This difficulty was emphasised in Harney’s autobiography *A Bushman’s Life* (1990) where he reflected on his involvement in a 1962 eisteddfod. The presence of Indigenous dance on the program led him to consider his suitability as a judge. He wondered:

How could I, a white man with few attainments, sit in judgement on the practised skill—the artistry learned in a lifetime—of such men as Argok? Points had to be awarded of course, because prizes were to be won ... Nevertheless, I thought we were being a little presumptuous. (219)

Harney’s account of the complexities involved in cross-cultural encounters illustrated the difficulties encountered by those who attempted to reconcile personal experience with dominant racial ideology. This anecdote, “Aboriginal Ballet” and “Pukumani” each confronted the issue with a sense of honesty.

“Aboriginal Ballet” and “Pukumani” unsettled the idea that Indigenous culture was inherently inferior to that of the West and encouraged readers to engage with the nation’s Indigenous heritage. While Ewers’ writing made no attempt to provide Aboriginal people with a voice, his novel *Who Rides on the River?* attempted to provide a credible Aboriginal point of view concerning an episode of contact history. The novel contrasted the perspectives of Sturt’s

expeditionary party with those of Aborigines they met along the Murray and Darling river systems. Most of Ewers' white characters exuded a sense of confidence in their racial superiority. They classified Aborigines as uncivilised savages (48), repulsive creatures (58), offensive and ugly (123). Aborigines were considered to be cannibals (161), varmints, dirty heathens and black devils (125) who should be "wiped off the face of the earth" (126). These expressions of racial superiority were offset by the views of the main protagonist Will Mulholland, a convict member of Sturt's expeditionary group.

Mulholland did not adhere to preconceived racial notions. He adopted an open mind and attempted to understand the Aborigines' point of view. This ensured that he recognised Aboriginal people as the legitimate owners of the land and challenged dominant notions of land ownership by the reflection that "'tis their country we're travelling through. I'm thinking 'tis kind of 'em indeed, to let us be going through it at all" (125). This statement reflected Ewers' personal experience. He claimed in *With the Sun On My Back* that travel through northern Australia gave him the impression that "we were in a black man's world. They were seldom far from our vision and never out of our thoughts" (20). This was not a view embraced by his companions who feared what they did not understand.

Mulholland's companions were not willing to consider an Aboriginal view point and failed to comprehend his interest in Aborigines. One character incredulously remarked that "you're a strange fellow, Will. You really seem to like these people" (172). Sturt's party were always uncomfortable in the presence of Aborigines and lived in constant fear of being murdered by people they considered inherently primitive and savage (117). The novel contrasted the views of those who blindly accepted derogatory racial stereotypes with those who based their opinions

on unprejudiced personal encounters. The implication was that travel and personal contact with Aboriginal people would unsettle dominant racial ideology.

The provision of an Aboriginal perspective in *Who Rides on the River?* suggested that many Australians had been quick to judge Indigenous culture as inferior, and slow to educate themselves regarding the nation's first people. The introduction outlined Ewers' disappointment in Sturt's lack of "real insight into the minds of these people" (vii). The expeditionary diary on which the novel was based ascribed the journey's absence of cross-cultural violence to religious intervention or providence. In the novel Ewers claimed that the lack of conflict was probably the result of several Aboriginal groups making a conscious decision to protect and assist the white party. Ewers' Aboriginal characters had agency and occupied positions of power and control. In contrast the white party was vulnerable and dependent on the good will of the local populations.

In *Who Rides on the River?* Ewers argued that the decision of the Aboriginal groups to refrain from attacking the white party was based on the Elders' belief that one of Sturt's party was a reincarnation of their ancestor Nurrunderi. The novel depicted this as the reasonable assumption of Aborigines who believed that by journeying down the river system, the white party was re-enacting a Dreamtime story in which Nurrunderi guided their ancestors down the Darling and the Murray Rivers (144). Reynolds recounted similar occurrences of Aboriginal groups classifying settlers as reincarnated ancestors and suggested this was a logical assumption amongst people who believed the spirits of the dead had pale skin, travelled across the sea and would return to regions to which they had a strong bond (*The Other Side of the Frontier* 32).

*Who Rides on the River?* depicted Aboriginal groups notifying neighbouring groups along the river system of the imminent arrival of the reincarnated Nurrunderi (119). Sturt's party misconstrued the resultant exuberant overtures of welcome and displays of weaponry as intimidating and threatening behaviour (127). The explorers feared what they did not understand, but they did not understand because they made little effort to interact with Aboriginal people. The miss-communication that Ewers portrayed between black and white was typical of the period. Reynolds claimed that frontier conflict was often "triggered by tension and misunderstanding" (*The Other Side of the Frontier* 94). *Who Rides on the River?* was an attempt to present a positive insight into Aboriginal culture. The novel conformed with Susan Lever's suggestion that fiction often carried and challenged progressive ideas (498). The provision of an Aboriginal point of view broke stride with the period's literary conventions by encouraging readers to re-imagine settler history and Indigenous culture.

The nuanced subtext contained in Ewers' novels was a characteristic of middlebrow writing. Ina Habermann identifies a tendency of English middlebrow novels to contain a political or social message; for example J. B. Priestley's fiction offered a commentary on English social conditions. This body of writing offered something more than mere storytelling (35). Ewers' middlebrow fiction undertook a similar endeavour. The adoption of another Aboriginal perspective in *Tales From the Dead Heart* not only provided the child reader with a convincing representation of Aboriginal society, it also countered society's readiness to pay little heed to the nation's Indigenous heritage by depicting Aboriginal stories as relevant to black and white children alike. The absence of any reference to white characters and the absence of authorial guidance in the form of an introduction or foreword, allowed

the young reader to form their own conclusions concerning pre-white contact Aboriginal culture. The plot centred around the Aboriginal boy Ngangan who chose to live on the fringes of the Wonkonguru group after the death of his parents. Ewers did not attempt to shield the reader from the realities faced by a boy who lived in a harsh and austere landscape.

The young character struggled to survive in central Australia during a time of prolonged drought. When food supplies ran low Ngangan knew and accepted that the weak and the elderly would soon be abandoned by the main group and left to fend for themselves or die. This practice was explained as an unfortunate but normal part of the life for nomadic people (37). Ewers refused to sanitise events or characters to make them more appealing to the sensibilities of his readers. He described a shimmering layer of goanna fat that covered Ngangan's skin that was "blacker than the blackest night" (5). This was hardly an image that might appeal to an urban child yet Glen Phillips states in *The Ultimate Honesty* that during his childhood he was fascinated by the book's portrayal of the life and legends of Aborigines (6). Phillips' anecdote suggests that the novel achieved some success in its goal of engaging young readers with Indigenous culture and Australian stories that were not Euro-centric.

Travel opened Ewers' eyes to the complexities dominating Australian race relations. He wrote frankly about being touched and challenged by his contact with Indigenous people and was willing to examine his preconceptions concerning a marginalised people. His exploration of Indigenous issues led to the development of an admiration for Aboriginal people and their culture. This was evident in a card Ewers sent to Franklin in 1951. The front of the card bore the photographic image of a beautiful young Aboriginal woman. He had taken the photo the year before at

Elkedra Station north-east of Alice Springs. Ewers expressed pride in the image as he believed that it captured a sense of the woman's vitality and happiness and the warmth and nobility of her people. He suggested that "her whole bearing and demeanour indicates pride of race, don't you think? Personally, I am of the opinion that her race has more cause for pride than ours" (Letter to Miles Franklin 1951).

This chapter reveals that Ewers' writing contained a similar willingness to challenge dominant racial ideology. "Aboriginal Ballet," "Pukumani," *Who Rides on the River?* and *Tales From the Dead Heart* depict a vibrant Indigenous culture that deserved a greater place in the national story. This view not only reflected the knowledge he had gained from personal experience, it also supports John Carroll's suggestion that it is the role of artists to "tell us the deeper truths about our condition" in a manner which ensures that "once told we never see things quite the same again" (221). By writing thoughtfully about his experiences with Aboriginal culture Ewers ensured that his concerns and views were shared with an interested readership.

Ewers' literary engagement with Aboriginal culture suggested that in order to gain a sense of being at home on Australian soil, the population should connect with distinctly Australian landscapes and afford Indigenous culture a greater place in the national imaginary. A direct benefit of this ideological shift would be the development of a distinct sense of place and a weakening of the nation's ties to Britain. This view supports Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra's claim that society will "remain incomprehensible to itself as long as it ignores or disregards Aboriginal culture" (71). Ewers' fiction and non-fiction demonstrated his belief that writers who explored what it meant to be Australian produced something of value to the nation:



If you look through a yearbook you will find complete details of Australia's output of wool, wheat and gold, of timber, pearlshell and dairy produce, but no matter how hard you search you will find no mention of books ... Yet, in a way, a book is the outcome of sun, soil and rain, just as wheat is. It reflects the conditions that combine to produce it, and if it has no cash value it is because its worth is more often to be expressed in a higher and more permanent currency. ("The Australian Bookman: Australia Through Her Books" 12)

Ewers' statement illustrates the great value he ascribed to writing that engaged with national scenes and issues. It was not surprising that the teacher, journalist, literary critic and author should view writers as educators with the ability to re-imagine concepts and ideology that appeared to be foundational truths.

## Conclusion

The fiction and non-fiction produced by *Walkabout* contributors Ion Idriess, Arthur W. Upfield, Ernestine Hill and John K. Ewers have long been dismissed as simplistic and unsophisticated but does their writing form a legacy that adds anything of value to Australian literary history? This thesis concludes in the affirmative. Their body of writing positively contributed to a literary dialogue concerning identity and race. This assertion refutes suggestions that the writers' strong focus on remote Australia was only designed to appeal to uncritical readers seeking uncomplicated literary entertainment. The four writers revelled in the Australian vernacular, dramatised their narratives and romanticised aspects of settler history but a close reading of their letters, manuscripts and published works reveals a nuance that has generally been overlooked.

Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers exposed mid-twentieth-century readers who ranged across a variety of fiction and non-fiction to a critical examination of white cultural hegemony. All forms of writing, whether critically acclaimed or unrefined, are worthy of a contextualised analysis because writing is layered in meaning. Bill Ashcroft argues that literature is “something more than the marks on the page, for it exists in the participations of social beings whom we call writers and readers, and who constitute the writing as communication of a particular kind” (*Post-colonial Transformation* 59). The textual layers identified in the oeuvres of Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers provide an opportunity to examine an ambiguous but insightful engagement with race, place and belonging.

The continued preoccupation of Australian writers like Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers with non-urban landscapes, histories and communities led some to

question whether this was an attempt to profit from the nation's long-held fascination with the outback. This was possible because David Carter notes a growing trend for books to be viewed as valuable commodities during this period ("Some Means of Learning of the Best New Books" 330). The four writers certainly attempted to make money from their bucolic themed writing but they were interested in more than popularity and profit. This thesis argues they attempted to engage readers and encourage them to reconsider the beliefs, viewpoints and ideologies that many accepted without question.

Ewers reflected on the condemnation of the pastoral focused writing of the 1890s in the 1966 edition of *Creative Writing in Australia*. He acknowledged that outback writing was described by many as "childish, immature, naive, lacking the true qualities of literature—something better forgotten" (215), but he argued this literature should not be summarily disregarded by those who failed to recognise that writing was essentially of its time and place: "What was important for yesterday may be of comparatively small significance for today; what is important for today may be equally insignificant for tomorrow" (215). Joseph Furphy's pastoral themed narrative *Such is Life* was identified as a novel that was once ignored (39) but had experienced a revival in its popularity and received critical acclaim (242). The rehabilitation of Furphy's novel is now complete as it is given the illusory title of "great Australian novel" (Nicholas Jose 6). This example suggests that much can be gained from re-visiting writers and periods that have been overlooked by critics and the academy.

Ewers was a champion of all writers who described and explored distinctly Australian landscapes, histories and communities. Literary writing is widely recognised for its positive contribution to a maturing national literature, but Ewers

argued that writing of varying or questionable literary merit also added something of worth to the nation's literary stream. He argued that "not all the writers discussed in this book have the same value in this stream, but all contribute to it in large or small degree" (*Creative Writing in Australia* 1966 216). This thesis is based on the same conclusion and argues that the writing of Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers is deserving of further critical attention.

In order for this body of work to be ascribed more literary and cultural capital it is not necessary for it to undergo a sympathetic and retrospective reconstruction. It is undeniable that this writing was frequently racist and paternalistic but it must also be acknowledged that the tone, stereotypes and language adopted by the writers to describe Indigenous people, history and culture reflected the dominant view that white civilisation was far more advanced than all others. Rhetoric centring on social inclusion and multiculturalism dominates twenty-first-century racial discourse, but Russell McGregor reminds us that whiteness was once a treasured quality and an emblem that signified membership to a society situated at the forefront of world progress (xx). The engagement of Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers with questions of settler history and nation not only reflected the preoccupation of their contemporary society with racial purity, it also reflected the influence of two global wars separated in time by a severe economic downturn.

McGregor claims that a number of artists and intellectuals reacted to these influences and expressed their disenchantment with a civilisation that repeatedly embraced conflicts which unleashed "the horrors of mechanised warfare on the planet" (20). A sense of disillusionment in a culture that had once appeared so advanced led many to seek reassurance in literature that shifted their focus from

generic urban spheres in which inhabitants appeared to be automatons, to outback scenes, communities and histories that engendered a stable connection to a past littered with vivid stories and colourful characters. J. J. Healy states that in fiction and in history the 1930s probed the past with an Australian not an Imperial yardstick (175). The global landscape had shifted so far that nostalgic visions of the outback gave Australians a sense of reassurance no matter how superficial, that the nation was distinct and separate from the weakened British Commonwealth. The writing of Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers explored a confluence of dominant Anglocentric ideologies, international tensions and domestic tensions. It resisted the nation's continued identification with the colonial centre and re-imagined rigid classifications of race.

Ashcroft suggests that "resistance has always dwelt at the heart of the struggle between imperial power and post-colonial identity" (*Post-Colonial Transformation* 13). This ensured that postcolonial writing sought to subvert and transform imperial discourse (13). Ewers' writing reacted to the dominance of Eurocentric perspectives and notions of home by disparaging attempts to render Australian cities, suburbs and communities indistinct from European counterparts. His writing encouraged the reader to ascribe value to distinctly Australian scenes and reject attempts to emulate the lifestyles, literature or cultures of other nations. This endeavour demonstrated the period's desire to generate a unique and proud sense of place and nation.

Ewers' writing examined the complex interplay between the lived reality of urban Australians, settler history, Indigenous culture and the bonds of Empire. He highlighted the manner in which cultural and racial constructs interacted and collided in literature (Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* 125), and rejected

the notion that Britain should continue to be viewed as the nation's spiritual home. This was achieved by the depiction of a distinctly Australian sense of identity. This reflects the claim of Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin that postcolonial societies "sought to establish their difference from Britain" (4). By embedding white characters in the landscape Ewers transformed them from aliens or exiles to an indigenised people who enjoyed a strong connection to their surroundings and sense of being at home.

Ewers was one of many writers who reinterpreted aspects of Aboriginal culture as a means of depicting a distinctly Australian sense of place, advocating for a reduction in the ties to Empire and providing "alternatives to the materialism, alienation and anomie of the West" (McGregor 20). His writing suggested that an Indigenous styled connection to local environs not only fostered a sense of belonging, it might also support the growing interest in Aboriginal culture. A widespread lack of understanding and empathy for Aborigines was noted in *With the Sun on My Back* which asked this difficult question: "You may find it fashionable to hang a blackfellow's painting on your walls. Would you as readily welcome a blackfellow into your homes?" (167). Ewers' discomfiting query highlighted the distance between the races but his writing envisaged a time when the social exclusion of Aborigines would be lessened for the benefit of all.

McGregor suggests that for much of the previous century most white Australians were largely indifferent towards the plight of Aboriginal people (xi). This sense of apathy had been fostered by the unassailable position of power enjoyed by settler Australians. Racial purity or "whiteness" had been a strong foundation that "underpinned Australia's nationhood, providing the heritage, history and culture that made Australia heir to a glorious past and embedded it in

deep time” (xx). As the century progressed and a desire to address Aboriginal disadvantage grew, racial attitudes shifted but change only gained pace after World War II when international pressure forced governments to address policies of racial exclusion (Macintyre 231).

The arrival of increasing numbers of non-British immigrants gradually diluted the Anglo element of the population and unsettled the myopic notion that Australians were white and shared a common origin, history and descent (McGregor 7). This cultural shift was evident in literature as writers were well placed to challenge the exclusionary racial constructs that underpinned society. Idriess’ writing revealed many tensions and ambiguities uncovered by a process of reflection. While his writing contained many derogatory descriptions of Aborigines depicting them as childlike, irrational, animalistic, primitive and sub-human beings, Idriess also unsettled the superiority of whites and placed a focus on Aboriginal disadvantage. His fiction and non-fiction provide a number of examples of the injustices effected by white settlement, government policy and social exclusion. The sheer number of Idriess’ melodramatic tales concerning outback life threaten to overshadow his attempts at serious inquiry, but a close reading reveals that he presented a fascinating insight into mid-twentieth-century Australian society.

Idriess challenged processes that displaced Aborigines and pressured them to assimilate into what was often a corrupt, anachronistic and narcissistic society, which in many respects was far more degenerate than theirs was widely considered to be. His writing encouraged the reader to explore Indigenous culture in a manner that sought to understand cultural difference and a sense of shared humanity. He showed that as Ashcroft suggests, language was a means by which readers could expand their horizons of meaning. Writing is a powerful form of language that

“does not merely inscribe the spoken message or represent the message event, it *becomes* the new event” (*Post-Colonial Transformation* 63; Ashcroft’s emphasis). By engaging with racial anxieties and tensions Idriess’ readers were encouraged to push beyond simplistic assumptions about race and to allow Aboriginal history and culture to be woven into a shared story of nation.

Idriess’ fiction and non-fiction suggested that Australian society would be enriched if it embraced a future that was more racially inclusive, however, it also displayed the many difficulties which must be overcome to achieve this ideal. These included fear, distrust, conflict and miscommunication which supported the perpetuation of negative racial stereotypes. All of these factors are evident in Idriess’ accounts of the periods he spent living in close proximity with Aborigines in remote locations. He admitted that at times he was happy to be in the company of Aborigines while at other times he most definitely was not. This ensured that his writing displayed a level of honesty in his acknowledgement of a mutual sense of attraction and repulsion between black and white.

Racial ambiguity dominated Idriess’ writing. He was unwilling to depict all Aborigines as the equals of Anglo-Australians but he also suggested that many aspects of Indigenous culture were superior to that of the West. He revealed the contradictory nature of cross-cultural contact, yet he also encouraged the development of a greater sense of fraternity between black and white. By gaining knowledge of Aboriginal culture and affording Indigenous people greater access to opportunities, his writing suggested that an enhanced sense of community could be achieved. Although Idriess’ writing was formulaic, his explorations of race and white cultural hegemony contributed to a complex literary discourse that sought to influence the national imaginary.



Upfield's representations of race shared many similarities with Idriess. Both depicted a long history of tenuous cross-cultural relationships and continue to be subject to generalised and simplistic criticism. In Upfield's case most critical attention of his writing focuses on his mixed-race detective. Did Upfield genuinely believe that an Aboriginal man was capable of excelling in the role of detective-inspector in regional and remote Australia? His published and unpublished writing revealed that he did. Upfield had lived and worked in close proximity with many who had a mixed-racial heritage. This ensured that he was well versed in the tensions surrounding miscegenation. A familiarity with the prejudice and disadvantage faced by Aborigines led Upfield to question the racial ideology which the majority of Australians accepted. One of the many Bony novels that contained a subversive subtext was *Venom House* (1952). The novel centred on a homestead that symbolised the poisonous effect colonialism had wrought on Indigenous populations and the environment.

*Venom House* depicted white settlement as a process that exacted a high personal cost. The murder mystery surrounded members of the Answorth family which had inherited a large station on the south Queensland coast from their great-grandfather. The Answorth forebear represented the colonial aggressor. His acquisition of fertile land was effected by the brutal dispossession of the local Aboriginal population. An old white stockman claimed that the Aborigines who resisted their expulsion met with a swift and violent reaction: the settler "shot 'em down. Then others rattled him by spearing his cattle, so he and his gang rode out hunting and shot more of 'em" (72). The settler's desire for dominion extended beyond the displacement of an Indigenous community.

The conqueror soon attempted to bend the landscape to his will by altering the course of a local river, however, the river mouth became blocked and the homestead was thereafter surrounded by water. Once the balance of nature was disturbed all efforts to rectify the damage failed (75). Upfield's imagery suggested that the environment sought to contain the settlement that had blighted the landscape. The displaced Aborigines also reacted in an extreme way. They placed the usurper and his descendants under a curse that brought tragedy and misfortune to each successive generation of the pastoral family (74):

Clearing the land taken by murder had not brought good to the Answorths. Creating pastures, breeding stock, fighting fire and flood, had done them no good. They had lived by brutality and suffered from hate. Power had withered them. Greed had rotted them. (94)

Rather than glorify the achievements of white settlement, *Venom House* contained a moral that warned the reader that death and destruction would be the outcome of poor custodianship and a disregard for Indigenous people.

It is notable that the figure of retribution in *Venom House* was an Aborigine. Bony was the only one who could bring the Answorth family to account for their past and present crimes. His satisfaction in bringing to justice a family that represented the worst aspects of colonialism was understated but plain. When one of the Answorths was revealed to be a murderer she

nodded as though agreeing with what she saw in Bony's mind, recognising and accepting the inevitable. It could have been to all those long-dead aborigines, as well as to Bony, that she admitted: 'You win.' (258)

*Venom House* presented a well executed murder mystery but it also unsettled the image of a proud and untainted settler heritage. Upfield prompted a reconsideration of the narratives of nationhood.

Hill's novel *My Love Must Wait* similarly engaged with methods employed by settler populations to construct a unifying and coherent sense of nation. It placed a focus on the ideological power exerted by those involved in documenting a nation's shape, form and identity. French and British maps of the Australian continent were depicted as representative of two entirely different nations. The documented images of disparate nations shared the same outline and the ability to erase the presence and history of Indigenous society. The novel revealed the fragile underpinnings of nationhood and highlighted British anxieties concerning the possibility that French representatives might stake a claim over Australian territory. Hill's depiction of the establishment of the Australian colonies resonated with wartime readers who were increasingly apprehensive about the vulnerability of Britain and Australia to invasion. The power base of the British Empire was shaken but *My Love Must Wait* reveals a sense of hope that Australia might overcome its present hardships and reconstruct a distinct and independent identity.

*Walkabout*, the tie which binds Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers together in this thesis, was also preoccupied with the development of a distinct sense of nation. From the late 1930s to the 50s each edition contained the following statement that outlined a desire to shift the reader's focus from urban realities and take them on a journey through varied Australian vistas: "And so, month by month, through the medium of pen and picture, this journal will take you on a great 'walkabout' through a new and fascinating world." Rex Ingamells' 1953 *Walkabout* article

“Fiction Walkabout” also indicated an awareness that the vicarious travel offered by literature could influence the reader’s world view.

Ingamells claimed that his past reading experiences shaped his perceptions of reality: “How vividly fiction can live in the mind was brought home to me on the night I camped with W. E. (Bill) Harney at Delissaville, over the water from Darwin” (10). As a storm raged round the camp Ingamells claims he was reminded of scenes from Herberts’ *Capricornia*. Although he had not given the novel any thought for a long period, images of the novel dominated his thoughts as he camped in a remote northern landscape during bad weather:

When the storm was over the book was still in my mind, and Bill and I fell to talking of its scenes and characters ... There is plenty to talk about in Capricornia, and we talked until we were tired. ‘We’ve wandered over a lot of country, talking about that book,’ said Bill, as we turned in for the night. ‘Quite a walkabout.’ ‘A fiction walkabout,’ I thought, and the idea Bill had put into my head kept me awake for awhile, wandering about Australia with the novelists I had read. (10)

This was not the only occasion in which literature heightened Ingamells’ sense of reality. He also recounted a similar experience on a visit to Tasmania. In this instance, Ingamells’ impressions of the island’s landscape was influenced by Marcus Clarke’s novel *For The Term of His Natural Life* (1874). As Ingamells stood beside a coastal landmark depicted in the novel, details of Clarke’s book played out in his mind and intensified the travel experience (12). This suggests that literature is an influential cultural product that not only reflects the world, it shapes the reader’s perceptions of place. Fiction and non-fiction provide readers with an

opportunity to journey through time and space, and facilitate a critical examination of the past and present.

The experiences outlined by Stephen Greenblatt in “Kindly Visions” supports the view that literature can affect a reader’s perceptions of place and race. Greenblatt argues that the American geographic magazine *National Geographic* influences the Western reader’s perception of non-white races via the frequent presentation of a convincing but superficial and sanitised image of exotic and friendly natives. The publication’s stunning array of photographs of Indigenous people suggests human kind shares many common experiences and values (112). Greenblatt claims the idea was so seductive that it influenced his impressions of the local people he met on a trip to South America. He refers to an incident in which he and his wife became transfixed by a young peasant woman on an isolated stretch of road. The transfixed couple persuaded the young woman with an offer of money to allow herself to be photographed. Greenblatt admits that he hoped to capture a poignant image that was the equal of those he had admired in *National Geographic*, but when the photos were developed he was disappointed to find they had failed to convey any sense of the magic he felt during the encounter (113).

Rather than capturing a photo of a beautiful and happy exotic South American, Greenblatt’s image depicted an intimidated and impoverished woman (113). The episode reveals that attempts to humanise cultures that have long been viewed as alien and exotic is a complex and fraught process, yet Greenblatt suggests that for all its flaws *National Geographic*

seems to me to be doing something immensely valuable: establishing a frame that at least a few readers every month will be driven to push beyond:

inviting the beginning of moral awareness; creating a representation that makes it possible to begin to situate oneself in a vastly larger world. (120)

This description can also be applied to *Walkabout*. Rather than simplistically reflect dominant constructs and narratives in a picturesque format designed to provide uncomplicated entertainment for unrefined readers, the magazine was capable of encouraging readers to reassess the racial ideology and social norms that relegated Indigenous people to a marginalised social position.

Readers familiar with *Walkabout* and the writing of Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers were encouraged to shift their gaze from generic urban confines and explore the diversity of scenes and peoples living on or around Australia's varied land mass. The four writers repeatedly examined definitions of place, home and race. Although their engagement with race was often clumsy, paternalistic, insensitive and depicted Indigenous culture as primitive, exotic and doomed to extinction, their sustained exploration of Indigenous culture presented it as a unique and integral aspect of Australia's past and present. This nuance has not been recognised by critics focused on acclaimed or literary writing.

Healy notes the significance of a settler society's literary engagement with Indigenous culture and argues that "to be concerned with an image of society, one has to be concerned with an image of man. Consequently, the Aborigine was locked into the efforts of Australians to define themselves" (6). This ensures that "whether one moved backwards in time or outward in space, one met the Aborigine" (177). Healy suggests acclaimed writers who engaged with race provided an antennae into time and space that probed the "genuine realities for Australians becoming conscious of what Australia meant for them" (177). This was also true of the writing of Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers because it displayed an awareness of

the need to transform racial ideology that had rendered Indigenous people invisible and prevented them from contributing to the narrative of nationhood. The suggestion that Aboriginal people and culture could enrich Australia's identity and culture was evident throughout their literary output.

Some might bemoan the incessant amount of inquiry into the influence of landscape and race on the Australian sense of home and identity, but the engagement of mid-twentieth-century middlebrow writing with these constructs has not been the subject of a thorough critical examination. Much of this writing was mediocre and formulaic but not all of it uncritical or focused purely on commercial gain. Some writers and publications encouraged readers to question and challenge dominant ideology and foundational "truths." The entertaining narratives of Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers frequently contained a critique of dominant views concerning race and nation. The reader could either ignore this nuance or reflect on a range of accepted conventions. Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers wanted to influence the evolution of a nation that was informed by its settler heritage but resistant to the continued dominance of the Imperial centre.

The sense of nation envisaged by four writers who felt connected to outback landscapes and who displayed an interest in the nation's cultural and social development was one that recognised and valued Indigenous people, culture and history. By supporting a greater understanding of and respect for Indigenous culture, their fiction supports Susan Lever's claim that the novel could be a forum for testing ideas against a range of experiences (498). This was a literary form that could carry "progressive ideas to a popular audience" (498). The writing of Idriess, Upfield, Hill and Ewers indicated they were interested in exploring a different racial landscape. This reveals the writers were of their time. If Australian

middlebrow fiction and non-fiction is subject to further studies that recognise its historical context, this writing will increasingly be viewed as a rich body of work that facilitates the study of Australian literary and cultural history.



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